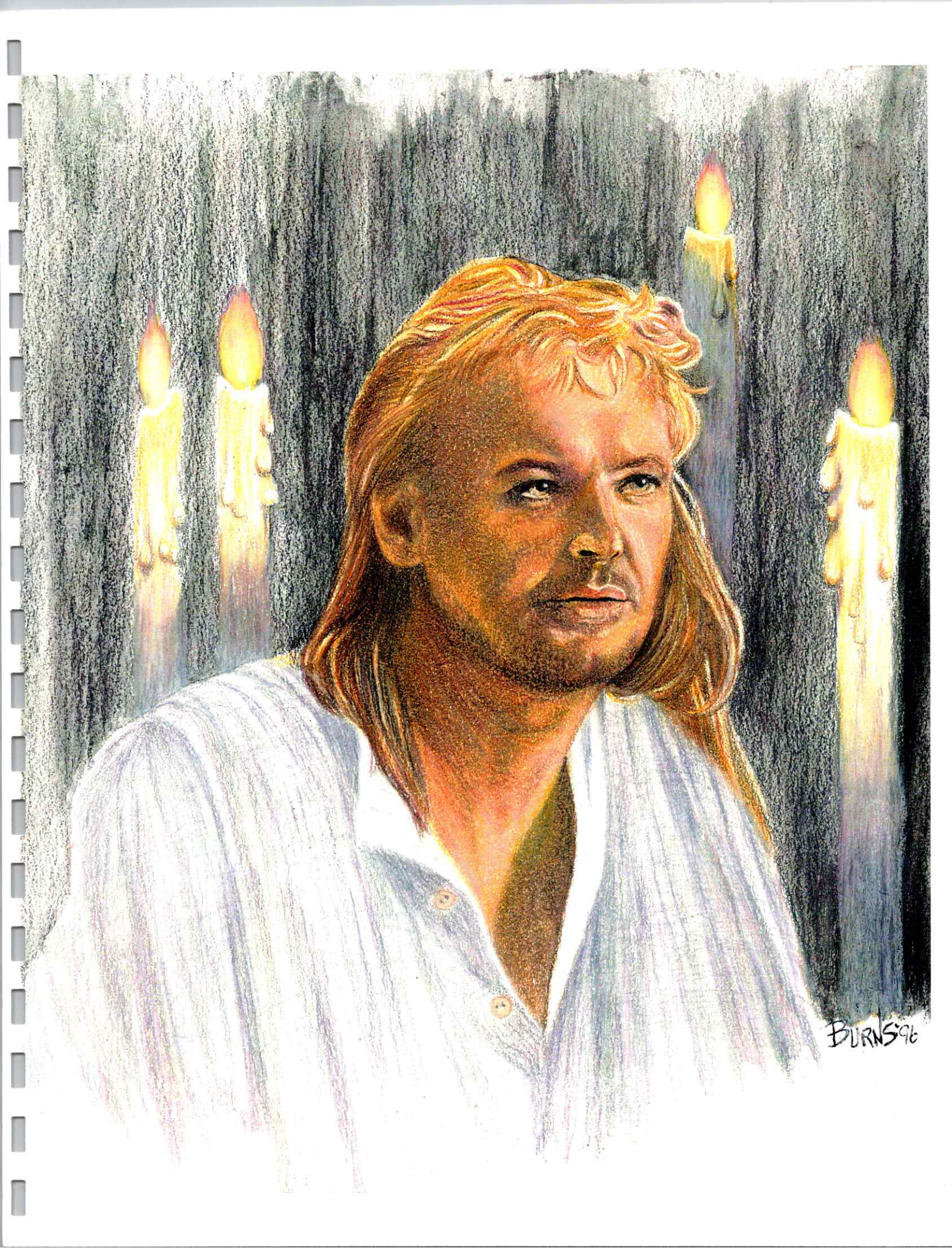


Knight



Fantasies

BURTON



BURNS96



Vonnie Shepard

Knight Fantasies

(An all slash Forever Knight Zine)

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Knight Fantasies

Contents

"Endless Knight" art by Maureen Burns	cover
"Where Demons Go" by Z.P. Florian	1
Art by Z.P. Florian	
"Black Knight" by Natasha Barry	8
"Warm Your Muckluks by My Fire" by Tippi	10
"Endless Circle" by Swendolen	13
"The End of Day, to Face the Knight" by Natasha Barry	14
"Set Me Free" by Swendolen	41
"St. Valentine's Vampire" by Elizabeth Stuart	42
"Caught" poetry by Swendolen	46
"Lessons" by Leslie GrantSmith	47
"Chance Encounters" (Forever Knight/Highlander) by tasha	55
"Reclamation" by Natasha Barry	91
"Stake Dinner" cartoon by Leah Rosenthal	94
"Enjoy my Hospitality" by Z.P. Florian	95
"Third Time's the Charm" by Eros	100
"My Gift" poetry by Swendolen	101
"The Final Knight" by Natasha Barry	102
"Better Off Dead" by Singersnapp	104
"Interlude When Contemplating a More Permanent Hell" by B.B.	106
"Blood Relations" by K. Ann Post	110
"Waiting and Watching" by Natasha Barry	117
"The Taste of Rain" by Tippi Blebins	120
"Long Nights" poetry by Swendolen	123
"Act Three" (Forever Knight/X-Files) by Ellis Ward	124
border on Table of Contents page by Swendolen	

Where demons go



Where Demons Go

by
- Z.P. Florian -

(Spain, 1521)

The rain was coming down in sheets, beating on the roof. Inside, the air was stifling. People crowded every inch of space in the small inn, talking, eating, drinking. The smell of greasy food and sour wine mixed with the odor of unwashed bodies.

In the corner, a scrawny monk was whispering to his companion, a fat man in the guards uniform.

"I can spot them any time. Look, there is one. Look, but don't stare. The blond man in the muddy cape."

"How can you tell?"

"He was here yesterday night, too. He orders wine and food, but he doesn't touch his cup or his plate. You know why. He is alone. He is waiting for a horse. The innkeeper told me he has been asking for a sturdy horse, he's traveling to France, he said. The innkeeper sent a boy to the village for one. But he will not leave anytime soon."

"Why?"

"Don't you know anything? He can't leave till the sun goes down. I know all about them. Now go and get at least two more men. He is armed, I've seen his sword and a dagger in his belt, perhaps another in his boot. If you want more proof, just go to him and—" The monk unwrapped his rosary from his thin wrist. "Ask him to kiss this. He will refuse."

"Why would I ask him to kiss a rosary?"

"Say something. Say your mother died and you made a vow to have a hundred men kiss her rosary."

"This is stupid."

"Doesn't matter, just do it. Stupid or not, he will not touch it, you'll see. Believe me, I can spot them."

"I'll be back with two of my men."

The monk nodded and watched the man leave.

"Morons," he sighed. "They have morons for guards around here. A miracle they are still managing somehow." He kept an eye on the blond man.

He was young and pleasing to the eye, his garments good quality, if a bit worn and caked with mud. The sword he wore was expensive and obviously excellent. Occasionally, he picked up his spoon and stirred his food, but never once tasted it. He'd swirl the wine in his cup, but wouldn't drink it.

As the monk waited, the innkeeper's boy arrived. The traveler gave him coins, and went with him to the stable, to look at the horse. In minutes, he was back, sitting down again.

One might think you don't want to travel in the rain, the monk mumbled to himself. I know better. You are waiting for the sunset. I know what you are, my fine young knight.

The guard came back, with two others. He went straight to the young man and held out the rosary. "Kiss this, if you are a good Christian."

The man rose and backed away.

"Arrest him!"

Suddenly, the inn was a lot less crowded. Everybody cleared away from the guards and the man, who drew his sword at once.

"I have done nothing," he said clearly. "What do you hold against me?"

"We know what you are, devil's spawn!" the guard bellowed. "Dare to deny it? Go ahead, prove yourself! Kiss the rosary! Here's a fine piece of roast pork, eat it!"

The monk stepped closer. "I know all about you, you Godless worm. You came yesterday, at sundown, and I bet you've planned to leave today, at sundown. I know why; because your kind cannot travel on the Sabbath."

The young man stared at the monk, at the guards,

and suddenly began to laugh, as if he had lost his mind. "You think I am a Jew?"

"And what else? You ate not, for you think our food is unclean, you would not kiss the rosary, yes, you are one of the Christ killers, masquerading as a Christian, wearing a sword even! Perhaps you could fool enough people in Toledo or Madrid, but here, you are finished! Take him away! Let the inquisitors talk to him about his crimes." The monk was triumphant. "Laugh, Jew, you won't laugh again for the rest of your life!"

The blond man was still laughing.

"Maybe he's not a Jew," the innkeeper offered.

"Well, then let's see him eating your stew and kissing that rosary," the guard grinned. "Will you now?"

"God damn you to hell!" the man said. "Come, take me, if you can!"

Sword against sword, he was too good to be taken; but one of the guards pierced his side with a lance and the other got behind him and hit him hard on the head with a heavy footstool. He went down then. The three guards were on him, three pairs of studded gauntlets hitting him, the monk had heard ribs cracking.

"Enough! Don't kill him, tie him up."

Nicolas stopped resisting when they dragged him outside. The heavy rain helped against the daylight, and once he was shackled securely inside the black prison coach of the town magistrate, he was safe. Safe, he thought, seeing the bitter humor in the odd ways how he measured safety. His side was already healing, his ribs mending, but he was too weak to break his bonds. He'd need to feed soon. Very soon. More important, he had to decide what to say about himself. Being born a Jew in itself wasn't an offense — the Holy Inquisition was only interested in those who had been baptized but still observed their faith in secret. His clothing marked him as one of those.

Accepting baptism and practicing the Jewish faith was heresy of the worst kind. They called it Marrania. Yet what else could he do but admit to it? His other choice was letting them find out he was a vampire. As a heretic, he would be tortured, imprisoned, eventually condemned to the fire — but as long as they took him for a human being, he had a chance to escape. Heretics were imprisoned "muris strictus", in underground dungeons. For a vampire, that was definitely better than a regular country jail with a window. "Muris strictus" meant bread and water as well, now that wouldn't make any difference to him. His best bet, his only bet was to admit to Marrania, or any other sort of heresy

they had in mind. Would they discover what he really was...he wouldn't live past the hour.

It was long past sundown when the coach arrived at the prison, where the Inquisitors took residence for the duration of their stay — as long as it took to cleanse the town of heresy. The townspeople usually cooperated with them, perhaps out of fear, perhaps because most of them genuinely believed that heresy was the scourge of Spain, the cause of all their troubles, the cause of God's displeasure.

It was late, but the Inquisitor was still awake. He was a small, round man, with a soothing, soft voice.

"Do you admit to heresy?" he asked Nicolas.

It would have been foolish to do so at once. Nicolas shook his head.

"How do you explain your behavior then?"

"The rain forced me to stay in the inn. I had to order food, if I wanted a place at the table, but I wasn't hungry." He forced himself to stay calm. Wasn't hungry, he said, hell, he was hungry enough to hear the heartbeat of every person in the room, to smell the blood in their veins.

"Your accusers say you've refused to kiss a rosary."

"I don't have to kiss every rosary somebody holds out to me," Nicolas said.

"How about my cross then?" A pudgy hand offered him an ornate silver cross, with the body of Christ inlaid in ebony. It was a beautiful object of art, but Nicolas could not help recoiling.

"Well," the Inquisitor sighed. "I think I've seen enough. We are going to please our Lord: one heretic less to soil our country." He turned to the scribe. "Mark this one muris strictus." To Nicolas, he said: "We need your name."

There was no answer.

"If you think to protect your family, you will be sorely disappointed. You will tell us your name, and the name of anyone sharing or hiding your heresy... soon enough." The Inquisitor nodded to the scribe. "Add double shackles and bread and water in affliction. I have a feeling this one will be trouble. Check his clothing for weapons, money or any object he could use."

They left him his shirt and his hose. Shackled hands and feet, he was led down to the dungeon, a large, windowless chamber already occupied by several prisoners. The rank smell of the stale air assaulted his senses. The heartbeats sounded louder, the blood coursing in human veins called to his hunger. His fangs lengthened painfully.

A single torch illuminated the stairs, leaving most of the chamber in total darkness. Nicolas stood there, looking at the other prisoners: a terrified old man, and two men sitting in the corner, both rough-looking. Nobody spoke to him. The straw on the floor was filthy. Nicolas was reluctant to sit down.

It could take days before he had an opportunity to escape — when will he feed? He couldn't think of anything else.

"A lordling," one of the rough men remarked. "Look at the fine shirt. I bet the seating arrangements aren't to his liking. Sit down, excellency, or are you afraid of dirtying your pampered arse?"

Nicolas flashed blazing eyes at the man. "Watch your tongue." The warning was soft, but the man turned away and remained silent.

God, he was weak. God, indeed, Nicolas scowled. How many centuries would have to pass before he stopped calling His name routinely, like a mortal, who had some slim hope to be heard by Him. The night passed, he felt the sun rising, and even with the hunger clawing at his whole being, he was sinking into the daysleep, collapsing on the damp straw, torchlight playing in his hair.

"Young sir, your food is here."

Nicolas forced his eyes open. The old man knelt beside him, with a pitcher of water and a heel of dry bread. My food, he thought, you are my food, don't you know? "I am not hungry. You can have it. Just let me sleep."

"You are most generous."

Nicolas closed his eyes, but the song of the man's blood was loud, very loud.

"Are you a heretic, signor?"

"Yes. Now will you let me sleep?"

"Sorry...but they'll come for you soon. Sleep, signor, while you can."

Go away, Nicolas thought, move away.

The door creaked open. They've come for him.

There was nothing he could do. The weight of the

day dragged him down, the sound of human heartbeats deafened him, he could barely hear the questions, couldn't answer, didn't dare to answer, knowing how his fangs would show if he opened his mouth. His silence earned him harsher tortures, more lashes, live coals on his pale skin. He endured it. There was an advantage to the hunger; he didn't heal right in front of their eyes. And the pain they could inflict on him was nothing compared to the pain of the bloodlust. He knew it was impossible to hold it back much longer. He'd feed, and they'd discover what he was...unless he fought his way out, they'd soon hold him with better chains than those he had now, forged of iron.

"This one is weak," they said, when he allowed his body to relax with the day's leaden lassitude. "We will start on him again tomorrow."

He woke with a low growl, raising himself on his elbows. Less than a yard from him, the body of the old man throbbed with the rhythm of a living heart, sung with the power of red blood. Slowly, very slowly, Nicolas moved closer. I hunger, he thought, I will take this life. Sooner or later, the man would be killed, either by torture or by the fires of the auto-da-fe. I need his life more than the priests need another victim. Silently, with deadly softness, he sunk his fangs into the emaciated neck. The blood was sweet and rich, every drop a miracle, as the borrowed life filled his veins, brought color to his ashen face. Dear God, he sighed, content like a child, dear God, how can such pleasure be the lot of the damned? Or there is truly no God, just a jumble of events happening by the will of soulless beings, mortal or immortal, equally insignificant in their blind cravings, no grand design, no judgement, no redemption. Oh, but it mattered not. He was fed, his pain gone, his body healing fast. He rolled away from the corpse, too content to care about anything. Hopefully, nobody would suspect that the old man died of anything else but the combination of his age and the torture.

Nicolas stirred.

The door opened and the guards thrust another prisoner into the room.

A boy of uncommon beauty, Nicolas saw, dark curling hair falling below his shoulders, eyes of

midnight blue, the face of an angel dragged from Paradise to Hell. Nicolas wouldn't have been surprised if the boy had wings. But the slender back bore not wings, just a torn shirt, flecked with blood. The boy's wrists were shackled, with light irons.

Nicolas saw him clearly, his night-sight sharper now, since he had fed. Saw the terror in his eyes, the desperate defiance in his stance.

The two men who mocked Nicolas the day before, turned to the boy. They saw him, too, if only for a moment, when he passed under the torchlight at the door.

"Come here, tasty morsel," one called out to him. "Cheer us up in this pit of misery. Be kind to us, and we'll roast a rat for you!"

Nicolas came to his feet at once, without thinking. "Leave him. He is mine."

"Yours, your lordship? Will ya fight for him then?"

Nicolas stepped closer to the two. "I might enjoy the exercise."

They were on him, both of them, in an instant. With shackled wrists, the fight was awkward, but no less savage, the irons were weapons, hitting hard. Yet they were no match for the strength of the vampire, even with half-healed wounds, Nicolas was faster, stronger and efficiently cruel. The two men lay on the straw at his feet mere minutes later.

Only then did he look at the boy.

He was standing still, his dark eyes bright with fear.

"Don't worry," Nicolas said. "I will not touch you."

"I am Felipe Zara."

"Niccolo Della Mare," Nicolas bowed slightly, offering the name on his traveling pass. "Sit down. You are hurt."

"Just a glancing blow." The boy tried to see Nicolas' face in the darkness. "What are you accused of?"

"Marrania."

Felipe's smile was gentle. "You share my faith."

"I am afraid not." He couldn't lie to an angel.

"They accuse you falsely, then?"

"I can't prove otherwise. And you?"

"The charge is the same, signor, but it is true. I will not deny it. Many have died for the Lord, I will merely follow them."

"A martyr," Nicolas said bitterly. "Your life for your faith."

"I am no hero. There are witnesses, they have proof. Servants had seen me praying. The choice was

made for me."

"Surely you believe you'll go to heaven."

"I do not know that, signor. If you are a Christian, it was your Savior who promised Heaven. My people do not claim to know what is beyond this life."

"And yet you are willing to go."

"Willing? Not willing. I merely accept the inevitable."

Nicolas listened to the heartbeats, fast and frightened. "So young and already so wise. But you are afraid."

"You are mocking me, signor."

"Upon my word, I don't."

"I owe you my thanks," the boy said. "You've saved me from those men."

"They are not fit to touch you."

"I am afraid I will not be able to repay the debt. We won't live long enough."

Not if I can help it, Nicolas thought. I will lend you wings, if you let me, dark wings, damned flight, but I will do my accursed best to set you free. And myself, in the bargain.

Felipe shifted on the straw, his manacled leg touching the dead body of the old man. "There's a dead man in here."

"Yes. Actually, three dead men."

"You didn't kill those two... aren't they merely unconscious?"

"No. A blow to the head with double irons, courtesy of the Inquisition, is more than sufficient to still a man forever." Nicolas wondered why he was so deliberately cold, hard and honest. Perhaps he wanted to let the boy see who — what he really was. Hours ago, he hungered for blood. Now, a brighter hunger consumed him, a need for beauty and gentleness. This cursed dungeon is getting to me, he thought. As if I were fit to touch him!

"You must be very strong," Felipe said, dread and admiration mixing in his voice. "Had they... have you been tortured?"

"Once."

"Is it very bad?"

Nicolas thought about it. "It is just pain."

The fear racing in the boy's veins was audible. "Signor, I am very afraid. Could you...kill me, please? With one blow, very quickly?"

"Now?"

"I'd pray first."

"Felipe. I do not want to kill you, but I promise this: if I cannot set you free, I will give you a death far sweeter than a blow to the head."

"How could you set me free?"

Nicolas brought his manacled hands together, then snapped them apart with a violent movement. The chain broke. He reached down to grab the leg irons, twisting the chain till the links separated. He still had the irons on, but that was nothing. Felipe watched him with incredulous eyes.

"Give me your hands."

He held the fine fingers in his palm for a moment, savoring their touch. The boy's chains were light, easy to break. "Listen to me, Felipe Zara. Do you have a place to go, a place to hide, if I take you out of here?"

"I know of a secret place."

"Good. Now swear on the name of your God, that no matter what you see, no matter what I do, you will obey me until you are safely away from this place."

"What will you do, signor?"

"Whatever I'll do, however I do it, whatever you'd think of me, stay beside me. I can save you." Unless you run from me in terror, he thought, unless you'd think the Inquisitors a better company than a vampire. "Do not fear me, Felipe. Follow me, stay at my side and you'll be out of here tonight. We must be safely away by daybreak."

"Are you a mage?"

"Don't ask what I am!" Nicolas hissed. "I am a chance to regain your freedom! And damn all else!" He turned his back to the boy and walked up to the locked oaken door, banging on it with the irons on his wrist. The sound reverberated through the entire dungeon.

A guard peered in through the spyhole.

"Come in," Nicolas cried. "There are three corpses in here."

Two guards entered minutes later.

The hell that followed was surpassing anything Felipe had ever imagined. The blond man in torn clothes transformed into a demon so terrifying, so powerful, that the guards whimpered in terror at the sight of him. His beautifully sculpted lips parted to reveal hideous fangs, the eyes blazed with unearthly flames as he flung himself at the guards, snapping their bones as if they were kindling. More guards came, with lances and maces, clattering down the stairs, but this demon took their blows with no more than a sharp hiss, his fangs tearing flesh. He needed no weapons: blood ran down his side and his face yet wounds didn't slow him down. He was horrible to see, a dark spawn of hell, a demon of destruction. Felipe saw him stagger when the captain of the guards plunged a sword in his abdomen to the hilt — but the demon didn't fall, merely backed away, leaving the captain with the bloody

sword in his hand, gasping in disbelief as the demon grasped the sword by the blade and twisted it from the man's hand, threw it aside. Felipe saw the devil's eyes flash with demonic hunger, fangs sinking into the captain's neck. The boy watched in terrified amazement. The demon was feeding and as he fed, his horrible wounds healed visibly. Among mangled corpses, this demon was suckling like a child on his mother's breast, Felipe heard his little sounds of satisfaction. The hellish light faded from the eyes, the bloody fangs withdrew, and it was a man's face now with no more than a drop of blood staining the beautiful mouth.

"Come, Felipe," he said. "I don't think there are any more guards left."

The boy was almost paralyzed. Nicolas looked at him. "Do not fear me."

"What kind of a demon are you?" Felipe whispered.

"One who's in a hell of a hurry, so move!" Nicolas grabbed the boy's arm and dragged him upstairs. As he passed by the cells of others prisoners, he broke the locks on the doors with the ease of a child picking dandelions.

Felipe stepped on corpses, felt the sticky pools of blood under his feet. He followed the bloodied demon who looked entirely human now, scarce a scratch on his body, a well-healed scar where the sword skewered him.

At the top of the stairs, a priest waited, holding a cross. "Vanish, demon, in the name of the Lord!"

"Step aside," Nicolas snarled, his eyes flashing again.

The priest didn't move.

"Take the damned cross from him, Felipe," Nicolas said.

The boy reached out. "Give me the cross, father, you don't know what he can do."

"I've seen enough. He is but a lesser demon, the cross will vanquish him," the priest answered.

Nicolas was beyond reason. The killing rampage left the vampire wanting more. He had tasted his power and his beast was craving freedom. He tore the cross from the priest's hand, his skin seared, smoking at the touch of it, but he held it long enough to laugh. "Such trifling pain," he said with contempt, throwing the cross aside. "That's not a lesser demon inside me, father. Remember that: 'twas your tortures calling him to life."

He turned. "Come, Felipe. We must leave."

"We were flying." The boy's voice sounded soft and dreamy. "I thought only angels fly."

"I've never seen angels, Felipe. I begin to doubt there are any angels at all." Nicolas licked at his seared palm. The burn refused to heal: blackened bones showed through cracked skin.

"You are a strange demon, Nicolas."

"I've frightened you."

"Yes. But not anymore. Do you know of the mysteries?"

"What?"

"God. Satan. Life and death. I think a demon should be familiar with those."

"I know no more than you do. I live. Days pass, years, centuries. I live. I know nothing." Nicolas spoke without emotions.

"You are immortal?"

"After a fashion. I can be killed."

"Are there many like you?"

"Enough." Some of the bitterness seeped into his voice now. "You are tired, Felipe. It was a long night. We are safe here. Nobody lives in this house. A long time ago, I've stayed here once. Now it's only spiders and bats. I will sleep when the sun comes up. Sleep beside me. Leave the shutters closed. Sunlight would burn me as badly as the cross."

"I will guard you."

The simple sentence shook the vampire to the marrow of his bones. It had been centuries since anyone offered such kindness to him. The boy had seen him at his worst and made no move to leave. His sweet mortal heartbeat showed no fear. It was that sound Nicolas listened to as he drifted off to sleep.

"How very heartwarming, this domestic scene. The vampire and his mortal pet, if I read it right... Don't worry, he will sleep for a while."

Nicolas vaulted upright. LaCroix stood in the doorway, raindrops glistened on his heavy velvet cape like diamonds. The master vampire looked royally displeased. "You must be out of your mind, Nicolas. You put yourself in danger. And all of us. Up to now, the Inquisition was very busy chasing heretics. Now, they are looking for vampires and demons in every corner. You've scared them far too much with that spectacular massacre." LaCroix glanced at the sleeping

boy. "How lovely. Indeed, he is very beautiful."

"Leave him alone. He is not a toy."

"What is he then? Obviously not food, or your hand wouldn't look quite this bad. Oh. Is it love?" LaCroix touched his heart with a gloved hand. "Such beauty deserves a second look. I am tempted to sample his charms."

"If anybody does, it'll be me," Nicolas said.

"I'll bring him across and give him to you, Nicolas. My gift. Do you want it?"

"No."

"No? What do you want from him then? The gentle mortal touch, the short-lived infatuation? The inevitable tragedy, when an affair of the heart turns into a hearty meal?"

"I have no intention to touch him. I want something else than the savage coupling of two vampires."

"You used to enjoy that."

"Not with him! I don't want that with him. Would I want fangs tearing into me, I'd know where to look."

"Would you?" A black gauntlet reached out with unearthly speed, pulling him up by his torn shirt. The other hand grabbed his hair to clear his neck. Sharp fangs sunk into his vein. Every drop of his blood surged to respond. LaCroix's bite wasn't gentle at all: the wound he had torn bled copiously, crimson rivulets run down Nicolas' neck, thin ribbons of blood coursed on his chest, brilliant droplets adorned his nipples. LaCroix abandoned the neck and moved down to savor the scarlet feast. Light, superficial bites rewarded him with a few fresh drops as he followed the crimson ribbons down to Nicolas' abdomen. Nicolas twisted, trying to get his fangs closer to the marble-white neck of his Master. LaCroix batted him away.

"Quod licet Jovi," he said. "My privilege."

"I thirst," Nicolas hissed.

"Hush..." The gloved hand encountered the hose and began to roll it down, the fangs scraping the revealed skin. Blood flooded the golden curls. LaCroix tasted that, too. "How good you taste."

He peeled the hose off completely. "Have I ever complimented on your legs, Nicolas? You should have been born a Roman. This sick obsession nowadays with covering every inch of the body... A pity, really." He bit deep, just above the nest of gold hair. "You can't help enjoying this, you see." Again, he pushed away the other's hungry mouth. "I know. You thirst."

"Damn it, you are bleeding me dry!"

"A little more passion and a bit less complaining, Nicolas, if you please. All I want is to give you more

than the, oh, how did you say, savage coupling of two vampires." The soft leather of his gauntlets was slippery with blood. "How does this feel? Gentle enough?" He stroked Nicolas' straining cock with exquisite caresses. "Is this the love you crave? Something above the hunger? A touch, more satisfying than blood?"

Nicolas closed his eyes. "Yes..."

He had never believed his Maker could be so tender. Yet LaCroix had not removed his clothes, not even the gloves; his kisses alternated with bites as he continued the pattern of bleeding marks around Nicolas' waist, turning him over, marking the curve of his buttocks, biting deep into the taut flesh till blood run down between Nicolas' legs. Only then did he free his cock. "A most satisfying lubricant," he whispered.

Nicolas shivered under him, aroused and hungry, past knowing which was the more agonizing need. "Lucius," he cried.

"Oh, yes. You should call me Lucius more often." He entered Nicolas with a single thrust. "You know I have been advised to kill you, for exposing all of us to danger. But I can't. I am too fond of you. Still, your careless behavior must be controlled. You are a child, always asking for the moon. I am not interested in children, Nicolas. I want to see you as you really are. You see, I prefer the savage coupling of two vampires..." His fangs sunk deep into the exposed neck and he drank.

Nicolas screamed, driven past reason, drained to the point of losing any semblance to a human being. He twisted wildly, freeing himself from his master's embrace and now he pinned LaCroix to the bed, frantically seeking the neck, tearing lace and velvet. He was allowed to feed now. The pleasure of the blood flowing into him was more intense than anything he had ever felt. Only now did LaCroix remove his glove to touch him with his naked fingers.

"Such fool you are, Nicolas," he said, with something close to genuine wonder.

LaCroix reveled in the savage power of this vampire he had created, letting him feed till hunger and lust both were fully sated and Nicolas fell into heavy, mindless sleep. "Now would a human being do this?" LaCroix asked himself, as he licked off the last ruby drops from Nicolas' body. "We are not human... and I like it this way..."

He rose and studied the two sleepers. "And what about you, little mortal? Should I keep you or send you away?" It would have been immensely satisfying to kill the charming creature, he thought, but he doubted

Nicolas would take that in stride.

A touch was enough to wake Felipe from his unnaturally deep sleep.

"Who are you?" he asked, "What have you done to the demon?"

"Nothing. He sleeps." LaCroix bowed slightly. "I have to ask you to leave. You may take my horse."

"I'd rather stay. I want to say farewell to my...to the demon."

"To your demon?" LaCroix laughed. "No, my child, he is definitely not your demon. He, too, has to go now."

"Where is he going?"

"Oh, where demons belong... you know, to the realm of the night, the valley of shadows..." LaCroix enjoyed the conversation. "To hell."

"He is a good demon."

"Indeed? Now that's a heartwarming thought. Leave, before something happens to change your mind about him."

He watched as the boy took a long, sad look at Nicolas and left, amazed by the magnificent stallion LaCroix had so casually given to him.

When Nicolas opened his eyes, LaCroix was seated at the table, drawing circles in the dust, drinking from a bottle. "Have a drink. There's more in the bags. Alas I don't have goblets."

"What have you done with the boy?"

"Told him to go home. We are leaving, Nicolas. I better take you far away from here. I think I mentioned that you've caused considerable consternation with your careless... damn, I can't think of another alliteration."

"He has a safe place to go, he told me. He will be all right."

"I gave him a horse worth a king's ransom. He said you are a good demon. You've charmed him, Nicolas."

"What did you tell him, why he cannot stay?"

"I merely told him you have to go back where all demons go... where you belong. In fact, I think I'm going to take you to that interesting new world across the sea."

Nicolas barely heard. "Where do I belong, Lucius?"

"To me."

The End

Black Knight

by
- Natasha Barry -

Nicholas Knight, nee Chevalier, nee other identities, looked carefully at the room, his home, the enveloping black — coffin black — so much the joke of what made a vampire's resting place. In this case, this was his home, his abode, his loft in Toronto — for this lifetime, this century, this moment, at least.

And this is what he wished to combat, to rebel against, to succeed, to win.

A recent visit to New Orleans had given him this fresh inspiration, this new approach, this dogma. So much like the Paris he loved, New Orleans, as it fashioned itself, and yet so terribly different, in fact. More the curious amalgam all of America was, with its cross-section of humanity; some settling not so cleanly, after all.

This new method, was inspired by a visit to an herbalist, an expert in voodoo magic and the white and black arts. Nick had perused the books, having investigated every other possibility, every chance, of regaining mortality — why not this? From his readings, he deduced, the symbolism was all important. And magic required concentration, focus, imagery, and tricks. In this enlightened fashion, he prepared the way for himself, scheduling several days of his vacation, telling Natalie — his friend and would-be lover — he'd been gone, out of town, and there'd be no reason for visiting or shared coffee breaks, and he'd purchased all the black cloth he could lay his hands on. Using the cloth, he draped sections over windows, walls, and furniture, letting everywhere he looked, and everything he

touched, be as dark as pitch.

But strength was also required, physical strength for endurance and stamina, and earlier he'd visited LaCroix, his blood father, mentor, former lover, and obtained some of the special vintage LaCroix kept in stock, the wine bottles of human blood. There had been the light of inquiry in the elder's pale eyes, but there were no questions asked, and no answers given.

Fortified now, Nick lit the candles, strewn throughout the room. He would meditate here, on what he was, and what he wished to become. If there was more to do, he did not know it. He could only hope and pray as the hours passed.

Many hours passed, thusly, with Nick becoming strained and weary. Energy sapping, and determination waning, he almost welcomed the shiver which came to him at the impression LaCroix was near, was in this room, in fact.

"So this is what you're up to." LaCroix came round, looking down into Nick's pale features, Nick gazing up at him. "I must say, I don't care for the decor. I can guess what you're up to. How long has it been, anyway?" LaCroix extended an arm, his hand. After a beat, Nick accepted it, being pulled into position beside his mentor. "At least three days, by your appearance." He then forestalled questions by volunteering, "I was picking up some strange emanations from you. That always gets my attention."

"I guess it hasn't worked."

"Did you really think it would?"

"I've been fasting, and... praying...."

"How very Christian of you. But hardy

appropriate," at this, LaCroix lifted Nick over his shoulder, proceeding to carry him up the stairs of the loft, to the second floor bedroom, "and utterly useless. You really should confide in me, you know, Nicholas. I've been around much longer than you, and I've heard it all."

"I can't trust you." For some reason, Nick didn't even know himself why, he wasn't objecting to the manhandling. It was so nice to be *done*, and relief was all he could express.

"I'm the one person you can trust. Aren't you tired of running yet?" And LaCroix dumped the lump he'd once known as Nicholas de Brabant onto the bed, more or less managing to place Nick's head atop the black satin pillow. "More black? Of course, I should remember. I have been here before. Just not in this bed."

"Not in this one," Nick sighed. "Is that what you came for?"

"I take most everything from you, Nicholas, even your denigration. I don't need to tell you why."

"I know you want me. I know your *lust*." He turned his head away from the broad features of his father.

"Lust', Nicholas? Lust is something one feels for an object, not the desire one feels for someone one values, one cares for. Lust, my dear Nicholas, does not survive eight hundred and more years."

Another sigh. "I have nothing to say."

"You never do, when you're losing the argument. This is the moment, traditionally, when you should be running off somewhere. But, this time, you don't have the strength. Shall I fetch a bottle from the kitchen?"

In spite of himself, a weakened Nick agreed. "Yes."

A flash and an instant later, LaCroix returned. He tipped the bottle to his son's lips, cradling the youthful blond head in his arm. "How many times I have been left saving you from your own foolishness."

"How many times..." Nick repeated.

"Shall I take my reward?"

Obediently, Nick parted his lips, as his

master's mouth lowered to take his. A brief kiss, of but a few moments, and it was at an end. Without opening his eyes, Nick sighed, as the warmth was gone, and his head was upon the pillow. There was no sense of his master's presence, or that of his lover, one and the same. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, and realized he was alone, yes, but more than that. He was on the sofa downstairs, never having been deposited on the bed, or sharing in a comforting kiss. LaCroix had not been here, and would not, unless his son was in dire need or Nick called to him.

And the meditations which had put his mind into disarray, revealing a truth, perhaps, he was still unaccustomed to — these, Nick realized he had lost interest in. What consumed him now was of modern vintage, the telephone. Should he call his father to him? Having been prepared to worship some unseen deity, was he now prepared to worship the one he could touch, could sense, could smell — could love?

A weakened Nick slowly rose from the black-draped sofa, faltering slightly, then uncovering the phone. The number was on his speed dial, not something he had to bring to mind. With the room so dark, he didn't even know whether it was day or night — even the skylight above had been covered. But a different set of candles was still burning, providing enough illumination, and he would count the fragments strewn, remaining, except he had no interest — now — in learning how long he'd remained here, encased in his experiment. A failure? Not quite. For he had learned a truth for himself.

But it was no surprise, no matter the hour, when LaCroix himself answered the phone.

To Nick, the voice was heaven-sent: "Yes?" "Father..."

The End



Warm Your Mukluks By My Fire

by
Tippi

Editor's note: This story first appeared on the jadfe list, but is not archived anywhere on net.

Perhaps it had been cruel to lock him out in the snow. Perhaps it had been cruel to lock him out in the snow with no clothes. Perhaps it had been cruel to laugh. Perhaps it had been cruel to laugh for over an hour....

Well, Nicholas had to learn his lesson, and every good parent knows children learn best by example. Failing that, some good old fashioned humiliation and derision might work.

"Have you learned your lesson, Nicholas?" LaCroix asked through the thick wooden door. The wind howled, but still no response from Nicholas. He shrugged and went back to his cozy seat by the fire.

A few minutes later, he went back to the door and repeated his question. "Have you learned your lesson? Well, have you?"

Grumble. Mumble.

"What was that? I didn't hear you," LaCroix said, cupping his ear.

"I said, 'Yes, I have learned my lesson.'"

"And...?"

Grumble. "And I was wrong. You *don't* look like the abominable snowman in your mukluks."

"That's all I wanted to hear, my boy." LaCroix unlatched the door and let the walking icicle of his son into the cabin. "Come, warm your mukluks by my fire."

"I'm not wearing any mukluks," Nicholas said under his breath. "Remember? You threw me out without any clothes. That's *ice* caked around my ankles, not fur."

"Well, we'll just have to get you warmed up then, won't we?"

He led a hesitant Nicholas to the fire and pushed him gently to the fur-draped chair before the fire. LaCroix himself was dressed head to toe in reindeer and seal hides. Normally the cold wouldn't bother him, but blood was in short supply this far into the interior of the Alaskan wilderness, and he was feeling less than his usual resilient self.

But, of course, there *were* other ways to get the blood one needed....

Nicholas sat stiffly in the chair; teeth chattering from the cold. His golden hair was dusted with snow and his lips had turned a most amusing shade of lavender.

"Are you cold?" LaCroix cooed, kneeling in front of Nicholas and taking his left foot into his lap. He flicked ice from the younger vampire's toes. "Is that better?"

Nicholas pouted. "...Maybe."

LaCroix studied the foot in his hands. "Oh dear," he murmured. "It seems you have frostbite. Let me see what I can do about that."

He leaned over and began to kiss the top of Nicholas' foot, allowing his relatively warm, steamy breath puff out over the frozen flesh. He gently massaged Nicholas' ankle and calf, working the muscles with expert fingers.

"Is that better now?" he asked.

"Unnngh," moaned Nicholas. "Ohhh."

He took that as a cue to continue. He ran both

hands up and down the length of Nicholas' leg, noting with delight that when he rubbed down the texture of the gilded hairs was smooth and satiny, but when he rubbed toward the knee the texture was far more coarse. His palms tingled.

Next he moved to Nicholas' knee, first kissing it, then massaging it with circular motions of his thumbs. When Nicholas' head lolled back and he closed his eyes, LaCroix became more bold. He positioned himself between the younger vampire's legs and used both hands to caress the other's thighs. He rubbed slowly at first, then with increasing speed, building up warmth through friction.

"Feels niiiice," the other one said dreamily.

"I'm so glad," LaCroix responded. He rose up on his knees so that he was on eye-level with Nicholas' nipples. "Well look, I think there's a little frostbite here, too." He leaned forward and took one of the rosy little buds into his mouth.

"Ahhh," Nicholas sighed, arching his back.

Pulling back, LaCroix asked, "Now wasn't that worth an hour in the snow?"

"Mmmm."

He took that as a *yes* and continued his ministrations. He licked and teased at Nicholas' nipples, sucking them into his mouth, worrying them with his teeth, all the while being very careful not to go over the edge and *really* bite down on them.

"Um," Nicholas began, "my lips... they're kinda cold too."

"Well of course they are," LaCroix said and rose up to kiss him. They kissed slowly, languorously allowing warmth to build between them. He felt the other's fangs with the tip of his tongue and knew then that he would have to be quick, lest he end up the drained one.

He reached down and grasped Nicholas' cock. "Oh my," LaCroix said. "The frostbite is worse here. Good-ness, it's frozen *stiff*. I'd better tend to this immediately."

He went down on his knees again and grasped Nicholas' hips in his hands. He lowered his mouth over the head of Nicholas' turgid cock, lapping playfully at the slit, and then engulfing the whole thing with his throat.

LaCroix's hide-covered shoulders were grabbed by Nicholas' strong hands.

"Furry," Nicholas commented hoarsely. "Niiiice and furry."

LaCroix sucked harder. He felt the hunger in him grow. He fought to keep his fangs to himself until the appropriate time. Suddenly, Nicholas thrust his hips up into LaCroix's face. Again and again he did this, grunting his little animal sounds of pleasure. The chair rocked precariously back and forth, threatening to cap-size at any moment.

Nicholas' hands moved from LaCroix's shoulders to the back of his head, holding him in place.

"Oh!" Nicholas gasped. Then, with more feeling: "OH YEAH!"

Nicholas' whole body went suddenly rigid for a moment before a convulsion of almost overwhelming pleasure went through him. His grip on LaCroix's head was almost painful as he came, but the older vampire rode out the pain for the sake of the payoff.

As the last of Nicholas' orgasm ebbed away, he collapsed, limp and exhausted, in the chair. He closed his eyes with a sated grin. Now LaCroix had his chance....

Allowing his fangs to elongate to their fullest length, he whispered, "My turn!" and bit into the inside of Nicholas' thigh. Nicholas jumped, but LaCroix held him down. Warm, salty blood flooded his mouth, even more delicious and life-giving than the brine LaCroix had just drunk from Nicholas' cock.

He was warm again. He felt the heat spreading through him, enlivening his cold flesh, sparking his own meager reserves of blood.... All the furs he was wearing as suddenly too much. He was practically sweltering. He stripped down to bare skin and was just about to remove his mukluks when Nicholas opened his eyes and began giggling like mad.

LaCroix scowled. "What's so funny?"

Nicholas covered his mouth, but the laugh would not be contained. Tears formed in his eyes. "A-ab-bominable s-snowman! Bwahaha!"

LaCroix's hand darted out and grabbed Nicholas by the throat. He lifted the younger one to his feet and held him against his own body. He was strong now with the infusion of blood. "Seems I have to teach you another 'lesson.'"

Nicholas shook his head as best he could. "No, no, that's all right. I've learned. Really I have."

LaCroix furrowed his brows. After some consideration, he finally released Nicholas. "I want an apology."

"I'm sorry. You know I am. It's just that I'm so used to seeing you in suits. I'm not used to seeing you in furs and mukluks. It's... incongruous."

LaCroix gave a little shrug. "Well, you know what they say, Nicholas. When in Nome, do as the Nomans..."

Suddenly, the door opened behind them. They both turned to see Brianna standing on the threshold. She didn't seem at all surprised to see them in this way.

"Um, if you two are through with your little 'role-playing' game, LaCroix is wanted upstairs."

LaCroix sighed. "What for now?"

"A brawl broke out. We wouldn't serve a guy another drink because he was toasted already and he started punching people out. It looks like the Wild West up there, not modern Toronto. Come to think of it, maybe you should go up here too, Detective Igloo."

Nicholas blushed. "Um, yeah, sure. Be right there...."

Brianna turned and left, rolling her eyes.

LaCroix sighed again. "Well it was nice while it lasted. I suppose we *should* get dressed and see what's going on up there." Nicholas reached for his cell-phone. "You needn't call for back-up, Nicholas. I'm sure we can handle it ourselves."

"I'm not calling the precinct," Nicholas said with a wink. "I'm calling my travel agent. I hear Nome is lovely this time of year...."

The End



Endless Circle

by
- Gwendolen -

Feeling weary and suddenly extremely old, Lucien LaCroix settled into his chair. He listened to the sound of the house and to the beginning day outside. He could hear the first blackbird's marking their territory by their song. He knew he should retire but he still felt too troubled to rest.

He could feel the presence of his favourite child, his beloved son in the house. His body was close but his mind, his mind and his heart seemed to be farther away than ever.

LaCroix sighed, weary beyond compare. The search for his wayward child, the worry and barely contained anger and the fear had worn him out.

And now?

Now they were reunited again and their old game could begin again. He would punish Nicholas for running away, take out all his anger and fear on his child when all he wanted to do was smother him with love, when he wanted to take care of him and protect him.

And Nicholas?

Nicholas would continue with his quest for mortality, there's was no doubt in that. He would reject him again, reject everything he offered, his love, his life. Nicholas would cause him pain and anger and fear again, just like he done before.

Once there'd been a time when things had been different, when they'd been able to laugh together, when they'd been able to express their love. When had things gone wrong? What had happened? What had he done wrong? Why wasn't his love enough?

For the hundredth time LaCroix wondered what he had done to drive Nicholas away from him. All he'd ever wanted was to live with his

children forever, to share his immortal life with him.

Why couldn't Nicholas see this? Why wasn't it enough for Nicholas? What else did he have to do to keep the other man close? What did it take to make Nicholas happy?

With a shake of his head LaCroix rose and decided to finally retire for the day.

He ascended the stairs and hesitated when he passed the room his son was sleeping in. Giving in to a momentary impulse he opened the door and stepped inside.

At the foot of the bed he stopped and gazed down at the man in the bed. Nicholas was laying on his back and seemed to be deeply asleep. For a long moment LaCroix contemplated the sight of his peacefully sleeping child.

So beautiful, he thought, my beautiful golden knight. How can I ever let you go? How can I ever let you have what you demand of me when I need you so much?

I will never let you go, LaCroix vowed to himself. Never. You can't escape. I'll do everything to keep you at my side. You're mine. Forever!

Finally LaCroix took a deep breath, resigned himself to his fate and to the fact that their personal war would go on, made him feel maybe not better but it gave him a purpose.

Resigned to his fate LaCroix left the room to retire to his own bedchamber. It was time to rest, after all he would need all his strength for the ongoing fight to keep his child at his side, to keep him safe and alive.

The End

The End of Day, To Face the Knight

by

- Natasha Barry -

From the television series *Forever Knight*.

Once again, Nicolas was declaring his position: "You know why I resist you."

"Oh, yes. You would have me believe that all men should be free." LaCroix continued on, pontificating why he'd brought across Rasputin, the monk, the confidant of Alexandra the Tsarina of all the Russias, for the express purpose of initiating a rebellion, and giving Nicolas this latest lesson as well. "Unfortunately, history teaches us that the human species lends itself readily to enslavement. It is a comfort to be told what to think, how to live, against whom to wage war. Freedom is the absence of individual thought. We are all under one form of control or another. The Tsar under the Tsarina, the Tsarina under Rasputin, Rasputin under me."

"And you are under...?" Nicolas inquired, genuinely curious as to how the vampire lord viewed his consequence in this world.

But LaCroix only looked at him calmly. Perhaps he was surprised by the question?



It wasn't often detective Nicholas Knight, born Nicolas de Brabant, allowed himself exposure to his own kind, who frequented the nightclub owned by Lucien LaCroix, the name under which the Roman-born vampire had gone by for many generations. Of course, humans also numbered among the customers who chose RAVEN

as one of their social hangouts. RAVEN was one of the rougher establishments in Toronto, a club where flashes of temperament, disparate linguistic skills, attitudes, and overabundance of leather wouldn't be considered out-of-place. Nick didn't care for the atmosphere of the place, though his blood sister through LaCroix, Janette, had been the previous owner. Since she'd ventured off on her own, again, disappearing from his life without a word to him, Nicholas had been making it a point to steer clear of the place as much as possible. Unfortunately, the club's clientele, vampire or no, often figured into homicide investigations. He'd even become acquainted with a four hundred plus year-old vampire, Vachon, and Vachon's family, who used RAVEN as their hangout. In an odd quirk of fate, the long-tressed Vachon was romantically involved — to what extent Nick did not care to know — with Nick's own partner, a human female named Tracy Vetter, who was not to be destroyed or converted, as Nick's own lady friend, Natalie Lambert, wasn't to be. It made for odd courtships, vampires and humans, but it also accounted for good friendships.

For his own reasons, Nick did not want his partner, no matter how trustworthy she'd been found to be, to know of his own predicament, being a vampire. As much as possible, he wanted his private life remaining private, though it was awkward at times, not being completely honest with the blond detective, an attractive female with an inquiring mind. She'd be a loyal friend, Nick knew, but his preference for solitude was often self-destructive,

keeping him alone even when there wasn't any reason to be. But this was a trait he valued in himself, and emotionally he'd found he only had it in him to invest in one human relationship at a time. In this lifetime, it was Natalie he clung to, and she to him. She was the only one he allowed himself to be one-on-one with in conversation or in that part of human lexicon known as **hanging out**. For all others, even those of his own kind, he usually ensured there would be others present.

Natalie was the exception to many rules. The pathologist was his personal heroine, as well as someone he nursed a physical attraction to. The emotional pull between them was strong, perhaps because the pathologist was as obstinate in her individualism as he was in his preference for brooding solitude. And she'd broken down every defense he would have made against her. She loved him, he knew. Or was fascinated by him, as many had proved to be. And often Natalie wasn't considered that easy-going among their fellow comrades. So the two loners found they could easily find time for each other. They understood each other, and what more could you wish for? If sometimes Nick wished with all his heart Natalie would plead with him to invite her into his unending life, and cause an end to his lonely solitude, it was a plaintive fantasy, so Nick only allowed himself to focus on his own desire for regaining mortality. If he managed this, with Natalie's assistance, within her lifetime, they would be together as a normal couple, that was understood. For to be human again, living out the span of a normal lifetime, was his obsession, as it was Natalie's need, and together they threw off anything which could interfere with that hoped-for eventual outcome.

But this search to regain his humanity was another reason Nick was always uncomfortable crossing RAVEN's threshold, for LaCroix was ever-present, and Nick dreaded every moment spent in the vital company of the vampire who would be his master. For centuries, Nick had pleaded, cajoled, and aligned himself with humans in an attempt to rediscover a way back to mortality, and LaCroix had haunted him every step of the way. A few months respite would be all Nick would ever command, before the commanding presence re-insinuated itself into his life. Wherever Nick found himself, whenever he sought to put down roots in fresh soil, LaCroix would be there, scoffing at any attempt the younger vampire made in an effort to proclaim his independence from the demanding way of life. That life was represented by his mentor, the vampire who had brought him across, the vampire who was a thousand

and more years senior to Nick's seven hundred plus — LaCroix.

Lord of the vampire race, and yet a loner except in regards to his family, was how LaCroix saw himself, and he behaved accordingly. The elder vampire had a presence and a charisma Nick had never come across before. It was frightening, and even after all these years he still fought the cringe which would creep over him with LaCroix's presence. For Nick, even with his longtime insistence on going his own way, the effort required for this resistance to that charisma drained him as nothing else save starvation could. With his soft, insinuating, tone LaCroix was instantly obeyed on any subject, his word being law to all but Nicholas, the rebellious son. So sometimes Nick wondered why LaCroix ever bothered with him at all, unless it was stubborn pride which caused the Roman to insist on bending the reluctant son to his will. Nick's rebellious nature, and reputed stubbornness, was a constant source of derision and revelry to LaCroix, and Nick would be frequently insulted whenever the two vampires did spare words for each other. LaCroix was simply unaccustomed to not getting his own way, Nick had long since concluded, and simply wouldn't relax until he had Nick sufficiently cowed.

With his vampire instincts, Nick always sensed the movements of those around him. With LaCroix, the instinct was more intense, unless either of them was shielding. There was a certain awareness which would pervade his system whenever the elder vampire was near. Now, Nick didn't need to hear the softly spoken, "Nicholas," to realize LaCroix — as usual — had come upon him before Nick could seek him out. But then, LaCroix was always there before Nick could endeavor to miss him.

Nick turned as the voice deepened with, "What brings you in?" He found LaCroix sipping from a wine glass, the scarlet liquid inside the crystal most definitely not wine. In his home, in the refrigerator, Nick kept bottles of cows blood to maintain him from the ravages of vampire starvation. Occasionally the blood was diluted to encourage his body to become accustomed to human digestion and waste. The method wasn't altogether successful, however Nick found he didn't hunger for true — human — blood as deeply as he used to. So there was a partial success to his and Natalie's efforts, it seemed. But he still couldn't keep human food down. That was, when he barely managed to swallow any at all. If Nick hadn't been as stubborn as LaCroix always accused him of being, he was sure he would have quit the notion of

regaining his humanity some time ago. Now it was a point of honor, as well as desperation.

Anxious to leave as soon as possible, as usual when face to face with the Roman, Nick abandoned diplomacy. "One of us has been a little too indiscreet," he stated. Discretion was one of the senior vampire's bywords. You could manage anything, was the constant advice to his underlings or acolytes, unless you were indiscreet.

"Really?" Another sip from the glass in his hand. As usual, LaCroix was contemplating Nicholas as if trying to sort out a mystery which answer had eluded him for some undefined reason. The Roman was a few inches taller than Nick, which was another reason, Nick was sure, for his always being on the defensive. "I've heard something about it. The two incidents were not far from my door, after all." Nick would only have been surprised if LaCroix had stated ignorance, for LaCroix was never ignorant of anything. On top of everything else, the Roman who'd acquired a French name was in regular — frightening — telepathic contact with Nick. Actions and conversations Nick would never confess to had been known to LaCroix as if he was an intimate. Now, Nick allowed himself a very small smile. "Two bodies. A little too much blood gone." LaCroix was always complaining Nicholas had lost his sense of humor when he'd decided being a vampire wasn't much fun. Nick never admitted to it, but he believed LaCroix to be — at least partially — correct. Natalie had such an acid wit, Nick knew that was one of the traits which attracted him to her.

"Your doctor friend must be perturbed."

At mention of Natalie, who'd last been in his thoughts, Nick was instantly defensive. "Do you know who it is?"

"Personally?" From looking as innocent as it was possible for the jaded personality with the frozen features and heavy mouth, LaCroix visibly reconsidered. "We haven't any new members of the community here — except one."

It was rare indeed to see the elder vampire discomfited, and Nick was frowning as he asked, "Who is it?" wondering how much of the story he would hear this night. Nick followed the other's piercing blue eyes to a female figure with long flowing red hair. It was possible she'd changed the length of her hair, perhaps many times, but Nick couldn't recollect any vampire with flame hair like that.

"Allsun."

Nick shook his head over his ignorance. "Recently brought over?" If so, that would explain a lot. Someone suffering the torments of first hunger would be indiscreet,

that hunger for blood overpowering any other consideration.

"Hardly. She's not much younger than me."

At this, Nick was stunned. He'd hardly met a vampire older than himself, and never one close in age to his own master. But the female with the piquant features was obviously vital and definitely here. And LaCroix was never wrong.

But the more immediate concern was the two bodies, and at whose door lay the responsibility. LaCroix, ordinarily, would never allow anyone to compromise him in this way. Was this female — Allsun — out of his control? "Does she frighten you?" he asked the unaskable.

As if Nick had told a joke, LaCroix chuckled. "Not frighten, Nicholas. Assuredly not that. We've crossed paths before. If she's the one you seek, you will have problems."

"How is it I've never heard of her?"

"You've been fortunate. Our path has never crossed with hers."

Realizing he still had a job to do, and LaCroix had obviously been as helpful as he intended to be, Nick moved away from the taller figure, heading towards the other end of the bar. The female, Allsun, he noticed was also automatically sipping from a glass containing red liquid. She turned to him immediately.

"So you are Nicholas." She gave a bright smile, looking genuinely pleased to see him. There was a trace of accent, but likely put-upon. Normally, vampires acquired many manners of speech during their long journeys. "Lucien has kept you carefully hidden."

At this, Nick spared a glance LaCroix's way, cocking an eyebrow. His response was the twisting of full lips, about what Nick expected. "You've heard of me? Do you know what I do now?"

"You feign human." She was oh-so-casual with a shrug. "You're well known for it, in some circles. That staves off boredom, I expect."

He liked her blue eyes; they were very direct. But so were LaCroix's. It was only his own eyes, of all the vampires he met, which were shadowed with hidden motives. Being a vampire had been very uncomplicated, now he remembered, except for LaCroix's controlling influence, which to Nick had been like being a caged canary, with LaCroix the hungry cat standing guard.

Even in the dim lighting of the club, he could see her skin was naturally pale, as if at one time freckled. A true Anglo-Saxon, when most of the vampires he'd known had come from the darker regions of the continent.

"You're a policeman. You must catch many criminals with your abilities." It was true, he couldn't argue it. And he'd have taken the remark for a compliment, only she continued, "Trying to have it both ways? How shameful."

"LaCroix says you're nearly as old as him. By how many years?"

She leaned closer. "Why don't you ask him? I wouldn't want to appear too old for you."

Nick frowned, now very confused. "Are you responsible for the two deaths which occurred in this area?"

"Am I? Possibly. What are you going to do, arrest me?" She put a hand to his neck, fingering along his nape. As usual, he was wearing his preferred dark clothing. Her eyes were proclaiming she liked the contrast against his white skin and dark blond hair, while he was uncomfortable with the touch which was somehow seductive. "I promise to be more careful, now I know this city is your jurisdiction. I've been wanting to meet you for some time."

"You should know to be discreet in any case." Many vampires still killed, and Nick couldn't get into that argument, not at this time and place. Either a vampire killed or it didn't, and that was the way of it. As humanity had progressed, however, most had learned to be carefully discreet.

Nick glanced quickly at where he'd left LaCroix, but the vampire had disappeared. Nick sensed, however, LaCroix's continuing interest in this interaction. Wherever he was currently standing, Nick knew LaCroix was tuned in.

Nick felt a sense of disquiet. This was all so abnormal, even for LaCroix, Nick sensed, and what did that mean? Then again, Allsun hadn't actually admitted to being responsible for the killings. And here she was, her hand having crept up to his face, stroking along a cheek. He abruptly sensed her passion, and saw it flare in her eyes. He immediately stamped out his own reflective fire. It had been very long since he'd engaged in vampire passion, the exchange of kisses and blood. Janette had been gone for many months, and he'd willingly deprived himself, seeking his monastic lifestyle. But usually he didn't find anyone excepting humans trying to encourage an attraction, and humans were easily turned down. He couldn't return what they would have wanted of him, that desire having failed so he couldn't respond in a way a human would find acceptable. So that innocent copulation was gone, along with his humanity. Now it was only the exchange of passion between vampires

which could arouse him, and arousal and satisfaction for a vampire was achieved in quite a different way than that between humans. The exchange — and emission — of blood was a requirement.

She seemed to read his mind. "How long has it been for you?" When it was obvious he wouldn't answer, her right hand pulled his head forward so they were nearly mouth-to-mouth. He was astonished at her strength, as it reminded him of LaCroix's, and only LaCroix could best Nick. The strength of a vampire was influenced partly by the power in the body of the human before being brought over, but the main ingredient to physical abilities, as well as heightened instincts, was the age of the vampire as a vampire. LaCroix, of course, having been the oldest vampire Nick had ever heard of, was assumed and taken to be the most powerful. But could Allsun master him, Nick, were they to experience a confrontation? The possibility made Nick nervous. LaCroix, at least, was a devil he knew, and sometimes understood. Was it possible even LaCroix didn't understand this one, and that's why he appeared to have no loyalty to her? LaCroix was accustomed to being lord. Was it possible he knew he wasn't lord, after all, but had to share the dominion? Couldn't this lady, Allsun, rightly be mistress of them all? And why hadn't LaCroix informed Nick of her existence before? Or, why didn't other vampires appear to know of her, and so Nicholas would have learned of her through them?

Nick would have to question LaCroix again, and perhaps Vachon. Though they weren't friends, Nick and Vachon had an understanding between them, as well as their mutual interest in maintaining the well-being of Tracy Vetter. Vachon occasionally acted as Tracy's informant, and Nick's as well — this last without Tracy's knowledge.

The filmy black dress along with the deep auburn hair gave Allsun the look of a sorceress, and Nick knew better than to attempt to break away from the strong grip which was more than he could combat. "Share some moments with me, Nicholas," she said temptingly, letting her tongue roam over his lips. "You are beautiful, and I have a need for beauty." Then she let him go. "Aren't you curious?"

He was curious, how could he not be? She was a temptress, for even though he sought to regain his humanity, she offered something he'd never been tempted with before — the flavor of a blood maybe as fine as his own mentor, but without the guilt. But to taste another's blood, especially one from a superior vampire, would only arouse his blood lust even further,

and drive him deeper into the well he sought to escape. No matter the tantalizing temptation, he'd have to say no. Either that, or risk sacrificing everything he'd been working for during these past decades. No momentary passion was worth that sacrifice.

"Why have you focused on me?" he finally sought to ask the question which should have been uppermost in his mind. After all, she had known of him, as if expecting to meet him here. "There are many here who would welcome your gift." He wondered — fleetingly — if LaCroix had ever had her.

"But they are not worthy."

"And why am I?"

"A vampire who has retained his mortal concerns, and morals? One who strives to be the best of both worlds, at least until he can abandon the one? You seek age and death, and perhaps any disease which affects many. You seek a profound experience, both for good and ill. You inspire curiosity in me, Nicholas, and there are not many who achieve that anymore."

"How do you know so much about me?" When had she stopped aging? At nineteen? Twenty-five? No, she'd definitely not reached that age as yet. Females from the age of a thousand years past matured far too early, and she looked young, still.

What had become of the one who'd made her?

She was saying, "You know how we communicate with each other, and hear of others in our journeys. For all your attempts, you have not been as isolated as you would have wished."

That was true. He'd sought isolation from his vampire kin so often in the past, once even setting up a home for himself in the wild, having only a pet dog for company. And even the dog, Raleigh, he'd sought to discourage in the beginning. But he'd come to rely on the pet for company, a warm-blooded creature who'd cared for him and whom he allowed himself to care for. But that idyll had not lasted long, as LaCroix had encroached once again, and on seeing Nick being comforted by Raleigh's presence, had arranged to bring the dog across. His vampire heart breaking, Nick had to destroy the only one he'd bestowed love on in some time, driving a stake through the hound's heart. Even now, whenever he saw a large dog, he was reminded of Raleigh. It was another explanation for his insecurity, for LaCroix could never stand it when Nick had grown close to anyone or anything. Even now, LaCroix detested Natalie, and would assuredly have destroyed her by now, if Nick hadn't made it plain he would have nothing further to do with LaCroix if that was to happen. It was an uneasy

truce, at times, between them. LaCroix, on his part, was apparently waiting for Nick to repent his yearning for mortality, and rejoin his vampire father on their eternal journey.

Nick had lost so much in the past, and mostly to LaCroix's machinations, it was one reason he hesitated to become close to anyone at all. Even Natalie, most especially, Nick determined was never to become aware of her tenuous situation, and how Nick feared losing her should LaCroix's resentment overpower his judgment and their understanding.

In the early days, when Nick had been brought across by LaCroix through his seductive influence, they'd been close, but that changed as Nick became constricted by the other's obsessive need to be the only individual in Nick's life. With Alyssa, Nick's beloved new wife who died through Nick's overzealous attempt to give her the immortality which would join them together forever, LaCroix had been particularly insensitive and wounding, so sarcastic in his dismissal of Nick's pain, Nick never had and never could forgive him. What was worse, even though Nick was solely responsible for Alyssa's death, he knew her death had occurred just as LaCroix would have wished. There was no blame to be attached to the Roman himself, and Nick was emotionally crippled, off-balance for too many years, with LaCroix offering the only emotional support Nick could allow, for how could Nick let himself become close to another human being? Loving another human would have been the final insult and betrayal of Alyssa, his bride. Since LaCroix himself bore no responsibility for the debacle, Nick was left to grieve in his failure, being thought less a vampire than an incompetent pupil. This attitude, Nick came to resent more than any other.

And LaCroix was wickedly amused each time Nick evinced a humanistic desire only to have the effort, almost invariably, backfire till Nick was a walking moralistic wound yet again. From that viewpoint, no wonder LaCroix kept insisting Nick should resign himself to his own vampire nature, and sometimes Nick wondered if the only reason he resisted the Roman was because LaCroix was LaCroix. Nick had been habitually resisting him for so long, it was a natural response. What was aggravating was no matter how much he fought, he could never break away: His car radio being obstinately tuned to the station LaCroix broadcast from every night as *The Nightcrawler*, and even the private drawer in his desk at work contained an 8x10 portrait of him. So LaCroix's voice and words kept Nick company as he did his job, patrolling the streets at night, between interviews

and body bags.

The control booth was housed in the club, and Nick now assumed that was where LaCroix had disappeared to.

His thoughts elsewhere, Nick told Allsun, "I've never heard of you before tonight."

"That's not surprising. I've gone by many names, but the one Lucien knows is Allsun."

"Before tonight, I never knew anyone close to his age."

"Like yourself, I often go my own way."

She was as maddening **in her own way** as LaCroix was. Nick realized he still didn't know anything, and probably wouldn't. There was no threat he could make to a vampire not yet found guilty of a crime; certainly not one stronger than himself. If she was no stronger than LaCroix, of course, Nick's occasional influence with LaCroix would influence her. It wasn't a question he could put to her, of course, but he could try and tackle LaCroix on the subject. Tackling LaCroix about anything seemed too extraordinary to contemplate, and so Nick realized just how much this unusual vampire was affecting him. Since when had Nick ever been able to control LaCroix? The elder vampire humored his son only when it suited his sense of humor or honor.

But if Allsun was guilty, she couldn't be arrested, as there would be no point to it, though a lifetime sentence without parole would be wickedly funny. The vampire race — his race, still — was to be protected, and destroying a vampire was the only alternative vampires faced in dispensing justice.

Nick left her then, and went to see if LaCroix was working in the booth. He looked through the glass, standing for a while, watching as LaCroix — whom Allsun insisted on calling Lucien, his assumed first name, as LaCroix was an assumed surname — spoke into the microphone, his soft, insidious, insistent tones repulsing or attracting all who were listening. Nick smiled then, as that voice used to attract — seduce — him, as well. And that voice also imparted knowledge and experience, to everyone tuning in, but more usually to Nick in particular. Whatever was going on in his life or career, whatever point of view he took, was generally reflected in the night's broadcast. What was LaCroix saying now, for instance? In the milieu of the nightclub, Nick could only pick up scattered conversation and the music of some particularly horrid song with abominable lyrics coming from the band playing on-stage. LaCroix's broadcast, from a soundproofed booth, wasn't designed to be heard above the din of the club.

As Nick continued to gaze forward, the other stared intently at Nick, **as if willing Nick to read his lips or the message in his eyes?**

As LaCroix had just begun his broadcast, it would be a while before it would conclude. Nick would more constructively make use of the time by returning to the station and checking in with his partner, who should have been — secretly — checking in with her vampire informant, Vachon. Then there might be other leads to look into. But as Nick turned to leave the club, he noticed Vachon had taken up residence. "What are you doing here?" he asked unimaginatively and the other gave him a peculiar look from his perch on a stool. "I mean, hasn't Tracy been talking to you?" Nick quickly followed up.

"You know, you two ought to get together some time. Yeah, she's been talking to me," was the dry, disgruntled, comeback. "I guess I talk to you now too."

Fortunately, Nick saw the humor in the situation. Tracy, after all, didn't know the extent of his relationship with Vachon. "Well, it can't be that bad."

The other man, who'd stopped aging in his mid-twenties, maintained the long hair and pretty features he'd been left with in departing mortality. He was eye-catching, all right, with an insouciant charm, and Nick could see why Tracy was helplessly attracted to him. What Nick appreciated about Vachon was his loyalty and interest in Tracy, and the way he had of viewing the world as if everyone occupying it were part of some gigantic scientific experiment which was more time consuming than worthwhile. Of course, Vachon hadn't been brought over in one of the more usual fashions: rape or seduction. He'd been dying a warrior's death when a mysterious lady sought to save him and another so they could use their immortality and special gifts to assist mankind. But Vachon fought being a man with a mission, let alone a man of vision: As Nick fought his vampire nature, Vachon fought being anyone's savior.

"Let me guess," Nick commented. "You don't know anything."

"It's not me or mine, I can tell you that." Easygoing, was how Javier Vachon portrayed himself, yet Knight was someone who frequently got under his skin. If it wasn't for Knight being under LaCroix's protection, he felt sure Knight would have been disposed of long ago, despite his longevity. Nick Knight was far too troublesome to vampires insisting on behaving as vampires...

"Too smart or too careful." It had been a long shot, but Nick was distressingly left with Allsun. And that

meant dealing with the two — now it was two — vampires who were stronger than him. Certainly no vampire would be envious of him in his position. Dealing with LaCroix alone often made him shudder in fear. But the female seemed intent on assuming some kind of intimacy with Nick. Why? “Have you ever heard of Allsun?”

The younger man nodded in her direction. “The redhead?” Then he turned serious. “I’ve heard of a redhead known as Katarina. I’ve wondered if she’s the one. But she ignores me, and I haven’t the guts to ask her. She’s pretty, though, and I think my ego is wounded.”

“What about Katarina?”

“Nothing much. Very old; very powerful. Sticks pretty much to herself. I don’t know any of the bloodline, so she could have perished by now, and I wouldn’t know.”

In vampire families, when one was lost, the others would feel the loss in the psychic vibration. That was a given. But what vampire didn’t have a long lineage? Certainly someone would be accountable to her, whether Katarina was Allsun or not. Which vampire didn’t procreate, if only to prove they could? LaCroix had his children, numbering the rebellious Nick among them, as well as the absent Janette. Even Nick, following the disastrous first attempt with his bride, still made others. The ones still existing, he sought no conscious knowledge of. But procreation, in some circumstances, was an irresistible urge. “Even though she’s not interested in you, why don’t you try it on with her?” Nick suggested. “You never know until you try.”

“You’re really curious.” Vachon wondered at that. “Should I be worried?”

“Afraid you can’t hold your own?”

The long-tressed brunette turned serious. “She’s older than me. I don’t know by how many years.” When vampires spoke of years, they generalized centuries.

“I’m sure she’ll take you seriously,” Nick assured him. “I want to know if she’s responsible. We all need to know.” For their own security, Nick was thinking, renegades couldn’t be allowed. It was one thing to kill, it was quite another thing being indiscreet about it. And, as far as Nick was concerned, it was better not to kill at all.

After a moment, Vachon mused, “I’ve never been party to the deliberate destruction of one of us. A renegade?”

“There’s no security for any of us, no matter who the renegade turns out to be. Whoever it is, he or she must be routed out.”

“Okay. I’ll let you know.”

With that, Nick left the denizens of RAVEN behind. It was always a breath of relief to do so.

When he got back to the station, Natalie was attempting to seek him out. “Have you figured out who it is yet?” He had to shake his head as he passed her and she followed. She was disappointed, and showed it. She knew of the secret race of vampires, and how the justice system she was part of had no influence even when the crimes encroached on human territory. It was frustrating for her, and often Nick thought she’d have been happier never knowing of him or any vampire’s existence. But, of course, her knowledge and expertise were often put to good use, as a pathologist, by concealing the occasional vampire killing.

Checking in with his own partner, Nick was amused as always at the inventions Tracy contrived to explain the lack of exuberant investigation into the case. With her knowledge of vampires, she knew who was responsible for the killings, and how police methods were of no account here. She’d be hoping for a break from Vachon, as Nick himself was. Though Nick also had Allsun and LaCroix to work with, and Tracy didn’t know either of them. Vachon wouldn’t dare inform Tracy about Allsun/Katarina, and LaCroix was far too intimidating, even on a casual basis, and far too close to home to Nick himself. But when it came to undercover operations within their own world, it was Vachon, the Spaniard, who found himself treading water more often than not.

“I don’t know about you, Nick,” Tracy was explaining, “but I’m about ready to call it a night.”

Nick realized what was really going on. While the case was effectively on hold, why not get caught up on sleep? “Good idea. Natalie?” He knew it was taken for granted at the station he and the pathologist were romantically involved. Since it suited them both, as Nick could be taken for **normal** while Natalie liked the excuse for not being romantically available, they were very open about the amount of time they spent together.

But this time Natalie had other plans. “I have some work to get caught up on, and you know mine isn’t the type anyone really wants lying around.”

He smiled as she took off with that example of her usual off-the-wall humor. Then he turned back to the blond. “I’ll see you, Tracy.”

Absently, the blond responded, “Oh, bye, Nick.” As usual, she looked as if she had a dozen thoughts traveling through her mind competing for attention. He was very fond of her in an abstract way, as he and Tracy weren’t allowing themselves more than a professional

relationship. If he became close to her, Nick would see it as a betrayal of sorts to Natalie. If Tracy found him mysterious, and he assumed she did, that would have to be. She was attractive, courageous, and quite intelligent, as well as being a resistor: The voice vampires utilized to influence others was useless on her; Vachon attested to it. For all that, Nick respected her. Fortunately, there was no physical attraction between them. The blond detective was someone he could feel a brotherly affection for, and still that wasn't something he wanted. His last partner had been killed in a plane explosion triggered by a bomb, and emotional distance was something he required even now, after all his centuries of practice at leaving people behind.

Normally his loft was kept intentionally dark, through the use of steel shutters, and candlelight or soft electric lighting, was preferred during daylight hours. But he'd reached home before dawn, so he stood for a moment at the window, gazing out over the expanse of city and stars. In his seven hundred plus vampire years, he never tired of the beauty of the night.

In his hand was the crystal containing his liquid supper. As he stood gazing at the dark view, he was sipping at the concoction of blood and wine, the pure cows blood supplied by a butcher. He'd developed a tolerance, and even something of a taste, for the flavor of either sustenance, attempting to wean himself from the constant craving for human blood which was an addiction without end. But the less blood he drank to survive, surely would mean a lessening of his vampire state and a return to the mortality he wished he'd never surrendered.

Very few of their kind, probably no more than LaCroix and Janette, realized human blood was something he'd been denying himself for some time. Out of protectiveness of him, lest he be considered and condemned as renegade, his family was keeping the incidentals of his existence a secret. But he hadn't killed a human in this century, and didn't even allow himself, very often, to drink of a fellow vampire, such as Janette, his eternal romantic weakness. She was a seductive witch, and the lure which secured his consent to being brought over as a vampire. How many humans could resist the lure of immortality, especially when the physical embodiment of their carnal dreams was standing before them urging them on? So that was some excuse he allowed himself, his instant and incessant passion for her, though he didn't allow it very often.

With a sigh, Nick reflected on the evening, and the difficulties involved when the criminal was a vampire.

Perhaps because of his earlier visit to RAVEN, Nick felt in desperate need of a shower, and he left the beauty and solitude before him to stand under the water, letting the deception of purity soothe his mind.

It was when he returned to the kitchen, seeking more nourishment, and wearing only a bathrobe securely tied, Nick sensed the presence of another. He turned to find the redheaded vampire, Allsun as he'd been told to call her, standing at the threshold. "How did you get in?" He'd issued no invitation to her to his sanctuary, he was certain of it. But, then, she actually wasn't in his domain, yet, either.

"Really, Nick," she grinned. "I actually came through that entrance downstairs. You're shielding, otherwise you'd have realized I was nearby. I followed you and watched you enter."

"I'll have to change the door code," he pointed out. The entrance at the first level of the building was coded, but the interior loft, reached via a freight elevator, had only an ordinary door. More security than that, would have raised suspicions. "Now you're here, though, I guess you'd better come in." He wasn't pleased by her appearance, since he seldom encouraged social or casual contact with the vampire community, but it was possible he'd learn something this night. But it was also inconvenient for other reasons. "Dawn's breaking in an hour. You'll be here for the day." He moved to the remote, activating the mechanism to lower the shutters.

Ordinarily, it was only his own vampire family, LaCroix and Janette, who would come upon him in this place. Being immediate blood relations, neither of them ever required an invitation or would consider asking for one. Allsun only made it as far as the front door, herself.

"We still have time," she was saying, responding to his statement about the lateness of the hour. "Perhaps you shouldn't have left RAVEN so early."

"Who are you?" he demanded, a new suspicion forming in his mind.

"Oh, you already have me placed. You've been making inquiries, even, with the young Spaniard. No wonder you're a detective. Still, you're a bit slow on the uptake. Lucien would have had it all worked out by now, with that clever mind of his. What has he told you about me?"

"Very little," he confessed, since that was harmless enough.

She decided to claim his couch, and he perforce had to follow her, the remainder of his meal forgotten. "I hate doors," she remarked, casually enough.

"We're of the same bloodline," he hazarded.

"No."

So he was wrong, after all. Well, it had only been one possibility. Yet he saw an aspect of the truth confirmed in her blue gaze. "LaCroix. You didn't bring him across, but you knew him."

"Yes," she said again, like a cat about to lick herself clean after a meal.

"How come he's never spoken of you to me?" Actually, his father was notoriously close-mouthed when it came to imparting personal history.

"We had a falling out, long before you came along. Well, not too long before, actually."

"Shouldn't I know you?"

"There have been many, many years. I've been near you, and him, but you've never seen me. We were quite careful of that. I knew Janette."

"And what about those bodies near RAVEN? Is that your handiwork?"

"Oh, yes. But I'm done with that. You don't have to worry anymore. It was more of an alert — a warning — between friends. A sort of in-joke." She gave a smile.

That last, he would discount, for the moment. "You knew LaCroix." He was still wondering at it. She seemed too physically insignificant to have had an influence with the Roman. And LaCroix specialized in not being interested in anyone for longer than a feeding.

"My greatest passion," she stated, with a sigh. "You shouldn't be so stunned. -You've known him in a different capacity."

"You seduced him?" That was the oddity, the idea LaCroix could be seduced by anyone. He was so self-contained and above it all, the Roman was. And he was always in supreme control, except in his anger. Then, situations would quickly get out of hand. How many times could Nick attest to the wounding of his own body, even as it healed through the combination of sleep and blood? So many times he feared his father would lose it one day, completely, and he would be left as dust... How to reconcile this image of LaCroix with one of someone being seduced?

"Oh, it was quite mutual. He wasn't conserving his passions then, or sublimating. His family has changed him. Janette is charming, and you've succumbed to his charisma as much as any other. That's what you fight, isn't it? His influence, even more than your natural allegiance to him."

That, Nick couldn't argue. The Roman was compelling, and that was one of the reasons Nick resigned himself to that control as often as he did. "Was the warning for him?"

"In a way." She smiled secretly. "He turned my head, my passionate companion. We were perfect together."

"I thought you argued."

Her eyes narrowed, though her pleasant tone didn't vary. "We were passionate. We would have found each other again."

"You loved him."

"Yes. He was no beauty, but he had something far more important. As immortals, we understand how intangible real beauty is. He had it. He still does. It is difficult to keep your eyes from him, is it not?"

"But why are you here now? Are you looking to re-establish the relationship?" It all seemed too incredible to Nick.

"I don't think that would ever be possible. Too many years, and he is no longer drawn to me, but would resist with all his strength. And so—"

Nick prompted, "And so?"

"There is always a final chapter to be written. I am going to be the one to do the writing." After a moment, she smiled into his eyes. "Over the years, I found him again, a few times, and one time I came upon him when he had discovered you."

"And we never met?" By this point in the conversation, with Allsun renegade or no, Nick was seated next to her, facing her as she folded her legs upon the couch, in as relaxed a pose as possible.

"He would not have wished my intrusion. I was a reminder he would do without."

"He was building his own family. Janette came before me."

"She was a beauty, and she was loyal, and he appreciated both qualities, but she was nothing to him after his discovery of you."

Uncomfortable, Nick fought an urge to fidget. "I don't know why you say that," he commented, as if he could force her to recall her words. It seemed insensitive to Janette, what this female was claiming.

"She can leave him, and has done so, again and again, and he lets her go. If they find each other again, fine. If not, fine as well. But when has he not followed you?"

This brought confusion into his mind, and Nick felt dislike for this female he hadn't known until this night. What proof was there of her words, after all? Even LaCroix had said very little. If she was who she claimed to be, had this history with his maker, wouldn't LaCroix have warned him? "I don't know whether to believe your words. They are fantastic. They imply love, and LaCroix has never spoken of love, of you or anyone." Possession,

yes. Disdain and dismissal, most certainly. For the most part, LaCroix had always treated him as a brat who didn't know better. That was part of what Nick rebelled against, this idea he had no intelligence except that which his father gave him. Even now he'd gained so much self-confidence, Nick fought the low self-esteem his master's mere presence threatened to instill in him.

But the Roman cared for Nick, that couldn't be denied. How often did LaCroix seek to assist him or save him from some debacle in which he had landed himself? So many graves he'd dug for himself, and LaCroix always showed up in the nick of time. Ordinarily, Nick attributed this to LaCroix's possessiveness when it came to one of his own: a child of his. But it was only Nick who appeared to have the means to make the powerful vampire vulnerable. So often LaCroix appeared disheartened or angry with rejection because Nick wouldn't — not couldn't — spare the time for conversation. Sometimes the dark emotion was covered by humor, but more often by curt words.

Nick had never considered LaCroix could actually love him, which was Allsun's implication. There was too much dissidence, too much hatred, between them. But from whence had it sprung? The possessiveness was always there, the urge to enslave Nick, and LaCroix's possessiveness Nick always deemed destructive. But, in the beginning, tenderness was there, as well. And no taunts. Those came later. Suddenly Nick sensed the other's presence, and it wasn't a surprise when Allsun looked over her shoulder and called to LaCroix, "He is an angel. I can see why you claimed him. He has an eternal beauty. You chose well, in him and Janette."

Nick was embarrassed. He'd always been uncomfortable when others brought attention to his looks, and he never deliberately directed attention that way himself.

As if to embarrass him further, Allsun smiled his way and continued, "I have seen only the face; not the body which evokes eternal desire."

LaCroix was near the couch, and he directed a stern look to Allsun, who was looking his way again — quite mischievously — then he allowed a softer gaze to rest on Nick.

Feeling as if he'd been caught in a lover's dispute, Nick rose, relieved his black silk garment had stayed securely fastened. Still, he would have preferred the armor of jacket and denim as LaCroix continued to stare at him as he chose to answer the female. "His face is available to all. His body is mine alone, and will be throughout that eternity you've spoken of."

Nick gasped, and wished he'd had more than diluted cows blood to drink. He was the weak one here, and knew it. Most of all, Nick understood he was the one with the least knowledge, and that he didn't like at all. He was the innocent, and yet he felt the one to blame.

"You have not been lovers for some time," Allsun pointed out.

"That makes no difference. He will return to me. Already, Nicholas doesn't hate me as much as he has done."

"Maybe the absence of hatred signals the absence of emotion."

"Stop," the Roman commanded of the female. "You know nothing of what has been between us. His mind calls to mine, even when he is unaware of it."

Nick wondered if that was true, and realized it must be, or, at least, it was nearly so. Wasn't that one of the reasons he listened to his father's broadcast each evening? That, among other reasons, barely explained to himself. Regardless, this would not be the time to argue the point with LaCroix. What was Allsun's purpose here?

"No matter he may — once — have wished to run from me, I can always trace him. Now he has no desire to flee from me. And **all** in our community realize he is under **my** protection."

"You will always be the one who made him." Very reasonably, Allsun pointed this out.

The full lips upturned as LaCroix luxuriated in the knowledge, "I will always be much more than that."

She sneered, "So you come to his protection. Is he so weak he cannot care for himself?"

"Not when he has no idea of the danger, let alone he is the target."

"I'm surprised you didn't come to me sooner."

"As you were watching him, I was observing you."

That makes me a lousy cop as well as a lousy vampire, Nick thought. It was as Janette once told him, in his striving to mimic mortals, he too often surrendered the advantages of his vampire senses. How many times over the years had LaCroix been near, and he hadn't even been aware of it, until, like a human, he would catch sight of his master via a turned head? The shielding, in his zeal to mimic humanity, worked against his nature as well as for his cause.

"Is it truly possible you could love him more than you loved me?"

Ignoring Nicholas completely, LaCroix stepped closer to the she-devil vampire who was intent on this confrontation. "I never loved you," LaCroix declared,

evidently stung the ties between himself and his son could be put in the same class as those between himself and this female. As if to spite her, he snarled, "You were of momentary interest, that's all."

"For many years," she put in, "not ending until you caught sight of this one." With venom, she had struck back. Turning slightly, she looked measuringly at Nick, then back to LaCroix. "He took you from me."

"Oh, no, my lady." LaCroix was quite calm. "I left you before that. You were attempting to regain me once again — for the last time — when you found me with Nicholas."

"Your love," she sneered. "He has looks, but nothing else. He cannot compare to you. He is pallid in comparison."

LaCroix smiled fondly, in remembrance. "You've never experienced his passion. And love and hate blend together for the fiercest fire of all."

"He runs from you. I can take him at any time, and have nearly done so. You couldn't stop me. He certainly couldn't."

Stung by the recriminations and accusations which were sailing forth, Nick was remaining silent. He was aware he was witnessing a private — of long duration — argument between these two. Whatever he said or did would make no difference, as he wasn't at issue here, no matter the threat to his own life. Love and betrayal, real or imagined, was the true debate. The issue was possibly to be settled here, in what remained of the night. If so, though, it had better be settled quickly.

"He is mine." LaCroix was at his most commanding, obviously surrender being the furthest consideration from his mind. "I have vanquished all challengers." Then the Roman addressed his mystified son. "You have always been mine. I made it truth. No one shall interfere. Even now, your human doctor is not long for this world, as all mortals are instant. I win, even without direct threat to her. I win, and you continue to be mine throughout the ages."

"But I can take him," Allsun was insisting. She'd even taken a step toward LaCroix, an invitation to assault.

Nick became worried. If this turned into a physical confrontation between the two, LaCroix would win, but how? There were few ways to destroy a vampire, and everyone in this room knew them. Allsun could use Nick as a shield, if somehow Nick allowed it. Then again, Nick wasn't at maximum strength, not with the absence of human blood in his system. Well, LaCroix wouldn't find him disposable, that was obvious. As for LaCroix, Nick

knew he'd never allow an assault to be made on him. Therefore — "It's two against one," he announced. "Even if you won against me, there's no way you could win against both of us." It was a risk, but sometimes a bluff was the best way to go. Allsun, after all, would have no knowledge of his level of strength.

LaCroix added, "I should thank you, my dear, as you've resulted in a reuniting, of sorts, between Nicholas and myself. Tonight's topic had been **When perfection isn't good enough.**"

As the ancient vampire visibly untensed, Nick quickly reminded everyone, "It is not long till dawn." Then he demanded of her, "Were the two human deaths merely to arrange this confrontation? You knew I was a homicide detective?" She didn't reply, but he knew he was right. At least partially. After all, she could have come to him at any time. So she had her own reasons for what she did, as well. It could have been the acting out of a personal vendetta. The two birds with one stone scenario was one he admired, as well. LaCroix, of course, was making no comment. Perhaps none was necessary. "Why does it suddenly matter after all this time? It's been nearly eight hundred years, since I was brought across."

"You can ask LaCroix. He understands how some emotions never die, and sometimes they become transformed."

Nick felt, rather than saw, LaCroix flinch in shock. "But whatever happens, there is not much time," Nick stated more calmly. "And I would rather you not seek shelter in my home."

Amazingly, she was the calmest of them all. "And you will not allow yourself to be seduced? Not even by one whose blood is rich and vibrant? You allow yourself only one vampire lover? Is it merely incest for you?"

"I have no vampire lover," Nick declared, confused as to the turn this conversation was taking. And there was only a few minutes left till dawn. He didn't want these two confined in his abode through the daylight hours. "I have no lover at all." Physical pleasure was something he'd long since denied himself, fidelity the only lover's fealty he could offer Natalie, his closest — and only — friend. "And I want nothing from you. I do not seek death through you; neither do I seek the pleasure your blood would bring me."

"A celibate." A bitter smile came to her lips. She turned to LaCroix, lifting her head but addressing him as she would a victor. "You have indeed claimed him throughout eternity. You hold a talent I have not mastered, seeking no family for myself. I would have had him in some manner, if only for revenge — or curiosity,"

she admitted, turning the humor upon herself. "Since you've loved him, there must be something to him. And, for all his running, he betrays a loyalty to you." With that, in a flash, she was gone, only a moment before Nick felt the flash of dawn appear.

In an effort to be casual, LaCroix remarked, "So I am here throughout the day."

Appreciating the effort at restraint, Nick allowed, "It's not the first time."

Nick wished he could feel comfortable divesting himself of his robe, but he didn't, and with LaCroix here throughout the day, there was going to be too much tension for him to rest. But his limbs were already feeling lax, and he found himself automatically climbing the stairs to the bed upstairs.

And LaCroix didn't say a word, and stayed on the main floor, so Nick found his rest after all. When he awoke, he found the covers draped over himself and his robe lying across the foot of the bed. Since he'd fallen into sleep atop the blankets, and still dressed, obviously LaCroix had sought to make him comfortable. It wasn't the first time the Roman had tucked him in, and Nick recalled how LaCroix could resist the lassitude of the morning far better than he. One of the advantages of age begetting strength, and LaCroix had over a thousand years on Nick.

Thinking his master gone, Nick heard the pipes in the bathroom and realized that was where LaCroix could be found, and he took advantage of the momentary solitude to think quickly over the events of the previous night.

When LaCroix returned from his shower, the gray hair on his severely shorn head gleaming, Nick was up and about, again attired in the black silk. "You look fresh," Nick remarked, switching on more lights as the continuing daylight outside prevented any vampire departures.

"It's been a long time since we shared a bed."

"Did we?" But Nick supposed they had. Out like a light, he would have been, and unknowingly enfolded in the strong arms as he used to be. But he hadn't been bitten. That, he would have been aware of. Since LaCroix hadn't taken advantage, whatever had happened in that bed between them, had remained pure. "I'm tempted to believe I dreamed last night."

"Unfortunately Allsun is all too real."

"But she left."

"She learned what she needed to know. Unanswered questions can be the bane of a vampire's existence as much as any human's. Regrets; what-might-have-beens..."

"Why didn't you ever tell me about her?"

"You would have sought her out, out of curiosity or to seek her assistance in leaving me. Between the two of you, she would have won in any confrontation. She has too many years, and far too few scruples. I always knew she resented you. That was enough for me to keep you from her."

"She was jealous of me," Nick was still wondering over it. "She didn't really understand anything."

"On the contrary. It's you who've never understood. That's the source of your mystery to me." LaCroix offered softly, "You're quite compelling, in your odd way."

"If you loved me, you'd have told me. Instead, you only sought to torture me at every opportunity." They were in the kitchen together, LaCroix, with a grimace, making do with Nick's supply of cows blood.

"How little you know of true love. Or the insecurity of unrequited love. Allsun wanted to possess me, as I've always wanted to possess you. She had me for a while, as I had you till I realized in trying to control you, I was only driving you away. It was a surprise I held onto you as long as I did, but that was the difference between Allsun and me, and you and I. You always did care for me, Nicholas. You would betray it in many important ways."

"I never thought you'd let me go. I keep expecting you to grab me back. I still can't believe I manage to live on my own." And **alone**, was how Nick saw himself now. He wasn't **alone** when he was part of the family. But Nick also remembered the agonies he suffered, wondering how far he could stretch the cord which bound each to the other. Even now he felt the pain. "I was always afraid you'd chain me to a wall rather than set me free: Kill me rather than have me with someone else. You held onto me far more closely than Janette or any of the others. They were always able to go their own way."

LaCroix stated, as if Nick's emotional recitation was of no account, "You gained your freedom because I couldn't risk pushing you away for good."

"But you're always there, near me. I thought it was to torture me, or to punish me for my temerity in seeking mortality. Is it more than that? Is it what she said it was?"

Now it was LaCroix who was agonized. He approached Nick, stopping only a foot from him, as any closer might have forced Nick into an involuntary step back, as they were so intense, the two of them. "How long since I've been allowed near you? How many years

since I could touch your face, gaze on your bare flesh? You keep it hidden from me. As much as you are able, you keep all of yourself hidden from me. And I've only wanted you with every aspect of my being since I first saw you. I encouraged you and Janette in your desire for each other, knowing your bond would be purely physical. There was always more between us."

"But you caused hurt to me. You wanted to hurt me, and see me suffering. I was allowed no company; no one to talk to or care for." How many times had he gone over this recitation in his mind? "No distractions," Nick continued, "unless it was by your invitation."

"I needed you to turn to me, to want only me. I would be your eternity, the keeper of your soul. I was never allowed to turn to you," he pointed out, leaving the rest unsaid. "But I could never stay away, even when all there was to feed my love was your rejection of me and everything I could offer." On his part, LaCroix retreated a step. "Even now you want to back away. And how many times have I seen you flinch just at the sight of me?"

Nick couldn't argue it. He was too unsettled whenever the other vampire was near. He felt suffocated; as if all his personality was being squashed. LaCroix had taken more than his blood from him, and he'd experienced enough of other vampires to realize their relationship was atypical. Love for a few years, and then willingly part. That was common, as lust was sated. It had even happened between Janette and Nick that way. But LaCroix had always seemed to resent every concern of Nick's which was independent of their own family relationships... "I have to save myself. My own identity. You'd control every thought, every waking moment."

"I'd control every sleeping moment, too, if I could."

It was overwhelming and frightening; quite seductive, to be desired in this way. It wasn't sane. And yet in all other ways, LaCroix was the sanest individual he'd ever met. That was another reason why Nick continued to seek his master's wisdom, via the radio broadcasts, or in person, even when he normally couldn't bear to be in the same room with him. "That's why I left you. The suffocation; the control. I didn't know you loved me, but that's why I left you."

"The symptoms were the problem, not the disease?" At this conclusion, LaCroix turned away with a rather bemused smile blanketing his white features. "The all-consuming passion was too much for you? And now? You are older now."

"And lonely," agreed Nick. "I've wanted forever with someone. I've sought it. I wanted forever with Alyssa

and others." Frowning, it was occurring to Nick to test him, "Did you suspect I would kill her in the attempt to bring her across?"

It was a moment before LaCroix gave a considered reply. "It was likely."

"Why?"

"Since you were so eager and passionate, and untried, you'd inevitably take too much blood from her. I was more experienced, and disciplined, when I took you. I did not have the eagerness of an untried youth, not even with the passion you inspired in me."

"And my blood..?" Actually, Nick wasn't sure what he was asking.

"Lying you down, while looking into your handsome face," LaCroix was remembering, "you were so bare, with only that slight covering. You had such beauty, and yet were scarcely aware of it, having been so protected, even as a soldier. You were such an innocent, it was obvious no man had dared to so much as touch you. Looking at you, I saw the face of a man, and yet a boy, and I wanted to keep that image forever." He gave a deep sigh. "You awakened carnal desire, and yet had the purity of the innocent. You were right, my Nicholas, when you stated my reason for loving your sister was because of her innocence. She was so like you, how could I not wish to preserve her as well? But you'd argued she'd lose her innocence in becoming one of us, and yet you were wrong, and that argument is what I've always held against you. For you've never lost your innocence, not in becoming a vampire, and not even when you were a knight, a trained soldier. You remained unsullied, a strange vision of idealism and purity... You never knew, of course, but you earned my respect for that. You see, my Nicholas, you were gold among dross. I felt such a need to preserve you forever; an obsession that grew with our years together, **to know you'd not only be mine, but to know you'd always be here.** And you're still idealistic and strangely innocent."

"And I've tried so desperately to become human again, to surrender that **forever** you've always wanted for me. No wonder you despise me for every attempt."

"I would never despise you. But even if it were possible for you to become human again, do you really think I'd stand by and let your form and mind become corrupted, to one day lose you to dust? I will fight this with every ounce of my considerable power. I will even involve others, if need be. How safe from me do you think your doctor would be if you were to become human again? Will you really want to grow old and die, when you'll feel too guilty to grow old with anyone else? If you

think being a vampire ensures loneliness, just wait until — or if — you become human again. Humans are always imprisoned by their mortality.”

At the end of this tirade, before Nick could respond, the telephone rang, and Nick fought to regain his grasp on reality as he went over and answered the call. It was Tracy, and she was wondering if they could work separately tonight, as she had her own angle regarding the case. Nick realized he still had a job to do as he automatically recorded the fact he wouldn't have to go into the station and meet anyone. “Fine, Tracy.” He rang off as he wondered if Vachon had somehow given her something to occupy herself with. No wonder what was going on, Nick was confident Allsun could take care of herself.

“I suddenly don't feel as if I had any rest at all.” It was true he felt exhausted, and most of all he needed time to think, and be on his own. “It looks as if it's going to be a quiet night.”

“Work isn't calling you away?” It seemed LaCroix was also unsettled by the intensity of their earlier exchange. Words he'd never thought to have spoken, had been spoken this day. “Perhaps you can accompany me to the club?”

“I don't think so.”

“Going to pretend the last twelve or so hours never happened?”

“You know me better than that.”

“Don't try that with me, Nicholas. You can block very effectively when you want to. But you should have realized by now, you can't ever try and shut me out. You talk of torture, and yet haven't you tortured me for hundreds of years?”

“I never meant to. That's what I need to think about. There is a change here, and I need to consider what that is.”

As usual, LaCroix was ahead of his son. “Because you still can't love me?”

“I don't know. I need time. Most of these years you've threatened me, tried to control me, and intimidated me. You've never spoken of love. You cannot blame my attitude for all of this.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just that I need to think, and I will take the least amount of time as possible, though we obviously don't have any reason to be in a hurry.” He grimaced and commented, “The one advantage in being immortal, is our lack of obsession with time. However, it was never my intention to torture you. But I do not want to be a vampire, either. If I can't be human, maybe I can

continue as the in-between I have been. But that will never be enough for you, and we both know it. But I cannot go back. I should never have been made a vampire, and we both know what a mistake that has been. We've both been paying for it ever since. Your desire is responsible for this mistake of nature. And we are both living the consequences. I must think. But I will not ignore you, as if I ever could. If you think back you'll realize it's true.”

“You are my life, Nicholas, and you know when a vampire speaks of life he speaks of the eternal.”

With that, the elder vampire was gone, and Nick breathed the short sigh of relief which was all he'd be allowed.

At least there was to be honesty between them now. The only problem was, Nick felt he preferred the complications their longtime misunderstandings had been seeped in.

And there was still Allsun, wasn't there?

He eventually made his way to the station, checking in with Natalie, letting her know the barest essentials of the vampire responsible for the crimes, and otherwise making his presence felt in the squad room, filling out reports. While at his desk, Tracy called in, once, to say she was still caught up in what she was doing, and she wouldn't be meeting up with Nick at all... This made Nick want to laugh, wondering what she was up to with Vachon and what kind of story he'd concocted for her. Well, if she was in the vampire element, at least she had Vachon to protect her. He wasn't that youthful a vampire himself, so Vachon was much more powerful than his lackadaisical attitude would convey.

But, considering they had a case with a couple of dead bodies to investigate, they certainly weren't getting much work done. So Nick filled in the remainder of his on-duty hours, joining Natalie for her coffee break at one point, then finding his way back home before dawn, hoping life would finally settle down again.

First, his final meal for the day, then, to bed.

As usual, LaCroix was hunting him down, never allowing Nicolas more than a moment from his company.

“Come to me, Nicolas.” A sly half-smile ingratiated itself upon the stern visage. “You know you want to.”

“I want to be free,” Nicolas heard himself stating, all too obviously. Even his sleeping form, inert upon the bed, twitched in response to the dream statement.

“What is freedom, but belonging to another throughout eternity?” was the counter response. “You think those unfortunates who are truly alone desire

their freedom?"

"Solitary freedom is always preferable to captivity in slavery."

Again the smile. "What is slavery if the bondage guarantees complete fulfillment?"

"How can there be fulfillment in bloodletting?"

"For a vampire, how can there be fulfillment in anything else? Have you ever been happier than you were in those early days, and the subsequent times when you forgot what it means to be human? Identifying with mortals led to your dissatisfaction." The dark figure was turning away, and Nicolas reached out to grasp only air. Just before fading away, his master released these final words, "Wherever you find yourself, Nicolas, you will find yourself with me."

On waking, Nicholas had the uncomfortable feeling he'd been arguing with himself. Perhaps he always had been.

At RAVEN, LaCroix was comfortably ensconced in his chamber, having no hurry to begin his day. He'd been dreaming, as well, but his dreams were altogether different from his son's. He had no idea what Nicholas was up to at this hour, but his son was a creature of routine. No doubt the homicide detective was rising from bed, awaiting the setting of the sun by taking a shower, and eating breakfast, the custom of so many mortals. So what if this superior being calling itself Nicholas Knight played at mortality with the iron whim of a child, and had for breakfast, not eggs and ham, but blood?

LaCroix's own dreams, like his thoughts, settled on this special child as well as the reappearance of the vampire he'd once cared for many centuries past: in another lifetime, so many lifetimes, ago.

His dreams concerning his son were always arousing, the only relief of that sort he'd obtained for many decades. As far as Nicholas was concerned, the father knew, he'd put to bed that particular aspect of their relationship for good. LaCroix, of course, was considering it only temporary. His son had rebelled so often, it was mind-numbing to contemplate, but that only made the spice in Nicholas' subsequent subjugation all the more thrilling. For years, LaCroix wouldn't be allowed a touch, a tender moment, a dazzling caress. Then, something would happen, it always did, and Nicholas would be his once again. For however short or long a time it was, for LaCroix, the time would be one of despair and amazement. The passion his son unleashed in him was something LaCroix could barely control, let alone understand. The ecstasy at attainment and possession was overpowering, and in all else, excepting

Nicholas, he always had complete control of his passions.

But Nicholas knew this. Or, at least, the naive young vampire had understood part of it. Now, maybe, he understood the rest. For it was true LaCroix had never said the words, or sworn that declaration, I love you. The emotion Nicholas aroused in him was far too momentous to be laid bare by such a trite phrase. But the proper wording never came along, not to this extremely erudite man. Nicholas, it appeared, never realized why his blood sister would always be able to come and go as she pleased, while LaCroix sought to bind the brother to his side. Nicholas never understood. That vulnerable, innocent quality was quite maddening and yet inspired this father's protective streak. And Nicholas so often required protection. With his earnest blue eyes and tender ways, Nicholas far too often got himself into one scrape after another, which LaCroix, perforce would have to retrieve him from. It was so routine now, LaCroix often wondered if he spent his days in-between rescues merely pondering the next emergency: It was better to be prepared for every eventuality.

Such as recently, when Nicholas had gotten part of his head blown off while on duty. If LaCroix hadn't been nearby, and on alert, as usual, there could have been a dangerous delay in his son's obtaining proper treatment. It wasn't as if a physician's mortal tricks would have any benefit to his son in a medical emergency, after all.

So, with the valuable assistance of LaCroix's blood newly flowing into Nicholas' veins, the precious blond head was allowed to heal and recover. It was quite special, in a way, having an amnesiac Nicholas on hand. If it hadn't been for that annoying Dr. Lambert, LaCroix could have had a wonderful time. Then, in spite of her wishes, no doubt, Nicholas had come to him anyway, and they'd spent the day together, the two of them entombed in RAVEN. And LaCroix had played the gentleman, supplying Nicholas with the rudimentary background of his mortal existence and his years as a vampire. He'd answered the inevitable questions, and, most importantly, LaCroix never hinted at their own scarred relationship. Nicholas' memory was bound to recover of its own accord, and soon did. Confusing his vulnerable son was something that would only have caused pain to them both, and more resentment by Nicholas. Sometimes the culmination of cat-and-mouse games were more troublesome than they were entertaining, and LaCroix always carefully weighed each alternative. This was not the time to indulge, he'd told himself.

Nicholas was always so confused anyway. It was better, in this lifetime, Nicholas be assured his parent was

someone he could always turn to, always trust, no matter the vulnerability of his circumstance. Being where Nicholas could have use of him, while maintaining a discreet distance, was his MO, as his son would say: his modus operandi. It was a technique well thought out in advance, but spurred by renewed desperation.

Nicholas had tried to kill him not too long ago. Had nearly succeeded, except LaCroix was far more powerful in his vitality and years than his son could comprehend. LaCroix had disappeared from his son's life for a time, to reappear quite suddenly. He'd tried maneuvering Nicholas back into his life, but the plan had unraveled at the end. Nicholas had proven more stubborn and independent, had grown quite a bit in his resolve, and nothing short of death would have brought the son to his father's side. LaCroix had chosen retirement, so to speak, not completely altering his personality, as that would have been too contrary and too dangerous to them both. But he'd subdued his possessive streak enough, lying in wait, that at least Nicholas wasn't instantly antagonistic towards him anymore.

Soon, and not too many years hence, Nicholas would return to him, is how LaCroix saw it, since his vampire son was showing marked signs of disenchantment with humanity in general — yet again. Nicholas' yearning to return to the uncomplicated life of his existence as a vampire had been steadily felt by LaCroix for some time, as he was always tuned to his son's vibrations. He'd even broached the topic once or twice to Nicholas, just to see how his son would react. Nicholas was in denial, but far more contemplative than he used to be, when the topic was raised. And now Allsun had made her appearance, and words had been said which could never be unsaid. Nicholas, perhaps, was less innocent — or more so — than he used to be. He would be changed, that was most definite. But how? That was the news LaCroix awaited.

By this time, Nick had finished getting ready for work and was in his car heading to the station. He assumed his partner would be awaiting him there. But it occurred to him, while driving, that now he'd absorbed the shock, he'd woken up this day into an entirely new situation. His life had altered, even without any fundamental changes occurring. **I've got something on him**, he thought, grinning, displaying the boyishness which most people never were witness to. **Who's got control now, LaCroix?** And he started to laugh, as the passing streetlights cast a glow upon his pale features.

A message waiting had him heading for the coroners building.

Natalie was telling him right away: "We've got another one."

"Another vampire killing?"

"You got it," she announced. "Tracy knows, as well. She was in here just before you. She's probably waiting for you back at the station." She began to pace her words carefully, trying to contain her anger. "I thought this had all been settled?"

He assured her, "I thought so, too." He bent over the body, lifting the sheet at the head so he could examine the neck. Not that he didn't trust Natalie, but... "Is it the same?"

"Well, it's a vampire, just like the others, but this one is different. I think, since you told me the other two deaths were caused by a female, this one was caused by a male. At least, the width of the puncture wounds are farther apart, indicating a different mouth."

"Since the bite marks are spaced further apart, it's a man?"

"Or," she said carefully, "a larger female. You told me this other one is slight. Well, unless her fangs are now spaced wider across her mouth than they were earlier in the week, a distinctly larger mouth is responsible for this damage. I must say, it's very nice how our killer vampires are being so polite about it all and not ripping anyone's throat out to conceal the manner of death. It makes it so much easier for me to tell how and why if not who," she complained. "Why do you think that is, Nick?"

He addressed the charge. "You mean because it's known you and I work together?"

"In a strange way, I think I'd prefer it if I weren't being known as an accomplice. As it is, I have to come up with fancy ways of fooling your own partner as to why I can't read the evidence before my eyes. It puts me in an awkward position, Nick. If those vampires out there are going to insist on killing, can't they — at least — cooperate with my office so I can reasonably get my job done while at the same time concealing any vampire-related death which would find its way through my door?"

Awkwardly, Nick commented, "I'll try and look into it." He was a little stunned.

Then she seemed to realize what she said. "Oh, forget it. I'm losing my mind, that's all it is. What else can you say about an adult woman scientist approaching the twenty-first century who still believes in vampires?"

Hiding a smile, Nick knew he was being dismissed. "Thanks, Nat. I'll look into it. Everything. I'll find out if it's — somehow — still Allsun."

"Allsun, eh?" she was remarking as he was out the door. "What a perfectly dreadful name." And she was back with the cadaver. She'd really had far too many vampire killings on her hands since she'd learned about Nick. Or, she'd always had the bodies, but maybe it was only since Nick she'd learned to identify the signs. Could be he was increasing her knowledge in her own field, which made him altogether useful in an extremely different capacity from what she'd ever considered before.

Ruminating on that, while sipping at coffee, she returned to record her — arguable — findings.

Nick, meanwhile, met up with his partner, and they each elected to part once again. Tracy, no doubt, was off to see Vachon, and Nick hoped that wouldn't mean she was meeting her source at RAVEN, as that was where he was headed to try and speak with LaCroix and hopefully meet up with Allsun, if she was still around.

What a difference a day makes, he was thinking and concluding, **None at all.**

Tracy's vehicle wasn't around, and that was a relief, as Nick parked his car outside RAVEN. Inside, he took a swift look around, not even seeing what passed for a redhead in view. Going over to the glass enclosed booth, he was standing only a moment before LaCroix turned his head and saw him. Almost immediately, LaCroix was pushing some buttons, probably cuing up music to play so the two of them could speak privately.

On his entering the booth, LaCroix was quick to wonder, "What's going on now?"

"We have another body," and Nick was frowning, "but it's probably not Allsun. Is she still around?"

"Not as far as I know. She can shield, too, you know. But you say it's not her?"

Nick was moving around the table so they could face each other comfortably. "I wish she'd given me the reason for the other deaths. Perhaps they're tied in."

"Perhaps not. Sometimes the younger ones do get carried away. You should recall, yourself, how difficult it can be to know when to stop, or how disposing of the body properly can be more trying than its worth. Fortunately, prudence and discretion do tend to come with maturity."

"It's the here and now I'm worried about."

"Now don't be antagonistic, Nicholas. Even you must be careful."

"Even me?" Nicholas wondered what his master was getting at.

"You are well aware we have certain lines no vampire must cross. The survival of our own species is

the prevailing law."

Nick scoffed, "What of it?"

The other stared at him measuringly. This was an old argument between them. "You have your years to protect you, as well as the fact you're of my bloodline. But there are certain areas even you, as my son, may not delve into without risking your life."

Nick discounted this, as he'd heard it all before. "What's going on? You do know, don't you?"

"I've heard," the elder conceded. "It's similar to an old time feud between families." He was leaning back now, into his chair, relaxing. His son, he saw, was unbending as well, even sinking into the chair opposite. "Allsun was involved. I don't think she is now. She played her part. I think she owed someone a service, and the part she played in the recent bloodletting was in payment. While she was here, she couldn't resist confronting you, probably because the scent of blood was in her nostrils. My presence, as well, possibly spurred her into the regrettable lack of decorum she displayed the other evening."

"But she's gone now?"

"I think so."

"And the rest of it?"

This earned a small smile from the full lips. "I think there are more bodies to come, but don't quote me on it."

"Why is this going on?"

"I told you — a feud. It happens in the best of families."

"But these are mortals who are dying," Nick argued.

LaCroix nodded agreement. "But you won't find vampire remains. You know very well we dissolve to dust when exposed to sun or fire."

"So is it one family of vampires and the others are mortals?" That sounded too strange, and Nick's voice was strained as he put this supposition forth.

"A mixture of both, in both. One of those Juliet and Romeo relationships which got out of hand. Now everyone's involved with everyone else and it's gotten quite silly. But there has to be a victor soon, as there aren't many protagonists — or antagonists — left. So, as I have advised you, Nicholas, stay out of it."

Nicholas was in silent agreement. When it came to the larger issues of the vampire community, it was only proper he stay out of it. By the sounds of it, the bodies collecting at the coroners office weren't human innocents, anyway, but mortals who knew what they were reckoning with. That put an entirely different slant on it, especially since vampires were being destroyed as well. That would reassure Natalie.

Then he thought of something else. "Does Vachon know all this?"

LaCroix frowned. "Probably. I've acquainted him with certain facts, but he was already finding out the story on his own." A question in his voice, he continued, "If your Dr. Lambert should inquire directly, he'll incorporate certain details and pass them along. I do recall she's met our friend directly. It really is awkward, Nicholas, this career you've settled into. It involves more subterfuge than we should have to deal with, and it's outside the family when you're involving the Spaniard."

"I have my reasons," and that's all Nicholas would say on the subject. He rose, intending to leave.

LaCroix forestalled him. "Some day, I may demand you tell me what those are."

"I have to go."

"Well, it can't be **the case**, so you must be running from me."

"Running from you? I don't have to bother anymore, do I?"

LaCroix lost his smile as the sneer appeared on his son's face. What, oh what, had happened? He felt as if a game had been played and he'd lost. But he, LaCroix, never lost. Not even when he'd been human, a conquering Roman general, had he lost. When his daughter became a vampire, had she brought across her own mother? No, she'd chosen him of all the mortals in the world. Why? Because he never lost.

He'd make sure he didn't lose this time, as well.

But he was worried. There was no doubt about that.

And Nick was walking out RAVEN's entrance, not thinking on the master he'd left behind, but how he'd always sought to keep his human acquaintances secret from LaCroix, never knowing which one the vampire would prove vulnerable if only to weaken his opponent, his son. That battle wasn't over, and probably never would be.

Tracy must never realize what Nick was, not because Nick didn't trust her with the knowledge, but for LaCroix and others to know she had that knowledge, that Nick trusted his partner that much, would only place her in an insecure position.

So Vachon kept his friendship with Tracy a secret, to protect her from LaCroix, as well as the Enforcers.

Her knowledge was why Natalie was consistently at risk, though she played at being ignorant of the constant danger.

He wanted me alone and dependent on him. He always wanted me alone. Now Nick realized why, he found it didn't make a difference. And what was it

LaCroix once told him? "Hate is a step in the right direction." Hate was the other side of the coin, wasn't it?

LaCroix was wondering **What have I done now?** Could he have been less open the other night? Of course. Should he have been? That was debatable. The truth was, there were certain things stated that needed to be said, if not at this time, probably at some point in the recent to distant past. Lying to Nicholas, and even occasionally, to himself, had never changed the facts. His obsession with Nicholas probably wasn't healthy, for what obsession was? On the other hand, at what point could love be judged an obsession? When it stopped being convenient? What was passion if it was merely convenient?

Switching off the music, LaCroix found himself back on the air, thinking his thoughts aloud, as he often did. "Since, gentle listeners, you were just listening to a song of love, I have a question or two to put before you. When, pray tell, does love begin, or end, and how does it begin and end? What is the progression from love to obsession, and how do we track it, and whom do we trust to know the truth?" He sensed Nicholas was tuned in. "A complicated question... But is there a simple answer? This is The Nightcrawler, and since I love you — **all** — I'd really like to hear that answer. Give me a call."

In the car, Nick waited to hear what responses the listeners would come up with. He had to admit, it was a provocative question. It occurred to him he'd like to hear the answer himself. "**Obsession. Possession. Destruction.**" Once, it had all been of a sequence to him. Instead, by the time he returned to the station, all the callers could volunteer was remembrances of injustices past or outright confusion. By the time Nick returned home, The Nightcrawler was off for the night. Retired, but only temporarily.

Nick wondered if LaCroix had ever received a comprehensive response, and he fell asleep to this musing, thinking back over the years, and how obsession and possession did not, always, seem to him — then — to lead to destruction.

The grin the Roman wore threatened to split his face apart. Nicolas could not help returning the smile, even though he was feeling insulted by the teasing. "How could I not have brought you across, Nicolas?" LaCroix was taunting him again. "You were so innocent, and there was beauty in your innocence, as well as in your form. You have wanted to capture that essence for yourself. How could you begrudge me what I intended for you — immortality?" Nicolas shifted onto his side; the mattress sagging. It was a cheap bed at an inexpensive inn, but they'd done the best they could for

accommodations for the day. LaCroix usually preferred pampering Nicolas, and to be pampered, but there was nothing else for it... "The gift of eternity." Nicolas pondered this debatable gift he was given. "But innocence is not that rare," he argued, after a moment. "Innocence, my dear Nicolas, is far more rare than you think. You are confusing innocence with virginity. You had not been virgin many years by the time Janette and I saw you, and yet your innocence shone as moonlight does upon a sleepy brook." Nicolas grabbed hold of the broad shoulders, pulling the larger man over to him. He was not slight himself, but the old Roman was both taller and wider. They built them strong in the ancient days, he often thought. "And was it only my innocence — perceived by you, one who is perhaps too cynical — that made you want to keep me forever?" Releasing the other man, Nicolas decided, "I think not." It was a game to be played, and one they savored, the spoken word versus the unspoken. They understood each other well, at this hour, under these circumstances. Nicolas was irresistible to his master, and both knew this, though LaCroix would never admit to more. And, after the first several years, Nicolas concluded there could be no more.

His refuge was now in fantasy, and LaCroix, off the air for the rest of the night, found himself walking through the now empty club, past the closed bar, not even bothering to grab hold of one of his specially bottled vintages. Instead, he went directly to his private suite, remembering the various guises of Nicolas as he did so, calling forth a Nicolas who was teasing, a Nicolas who was vicious, one who was playful, and one who was indomitable. The Nicolas who appeared so innocent and yet was anything but. The total and apparent contradiction. What an endless mystery Nicolas presented.

How many times had he seen the deep blue eyes gleaming with hunger, or with laughter? It had been far too long since he'd seen those eyes betray anything except guile, subterfuge, and wariness — the betrayal of intimidation of his own presence. How had his pure, and occasionally charming, knight progressed to this? How had the lighthearted young man become so serious, so dark? "I didn't take your wit from you, I hope. Anything but that."

Granted he'd always been stern with Nicolas, but that was because he always needed this son to be stronger than anyone else — even his own father. Nicolas had to be strong enough to withstand any attempt at destruction. How could LaCroix take the risk

of having his favorite child be anything less? Even vampires weren't indestructible, unless you lived long enough, and developed the strength. But Nicolas disdained the usage of most of his powers, in his vain attempt to feign human, so he wasn't at full strength and ability for a vampire of his years. That knowledge, LaCroix and Janette between them, endeavored to keep secret, lest an attack be instigated by their own kind — regardless of LaCroix's interest in the welfare of his son. For it was true, many times would Nicolas have been destroyed — by mortals, yet! — if LaCroix hadn't always managed to intercede before Nicolas could be lost to him forever.

If there was such a thing as a guardian angel, surely LaCroix qualified. As it stood, Nicolas was shielded from intended harm by their own kind, as there were few vampires existing who dared cross LaCroix — excepting his own foolish son, Nicolas.

A small smile lit the cold features. Perhaps there was something to the theory of divine retribution. Or perhaps there was joy to be had in ultimate vulnerability. LaCroix gave an unnecessary sigh. "He is my weak spot, after all," he announced carelessly to a world, which, at this point, was completely nonexistent — and uncaring — to him.

Lying in the bath, he thought on how many times he'd caressed Nicolas' form free of the grime occasionally collected from living so much of life on the road. Yes, the old days were quite a bit different. One couldn't fly all the time, as it was difficult to seek game that way, and there had always been the sun to consider. So often they'd had to take shelter in caves, or in the dirt, and usually — in the beginning — LaCroix would enfold Nicolas in his arms, usually when Janette wasn't about, and retiring from Nicolas' person quite often when she was. For his son and daughter were immediately established as sexual partners and usually Janette sought the embrace of her lover, which was fine with LaCroix, as Nicolas' passion for Janette kept the son near the father. But most often LaCroix's daughter was elsewhere, glorying in her vampirism as Nicolas became more bitter in his. They were such opposites, they could never seek happiness together, but the physical attraction between them, quite instant, was how LaCroix persuaded the young knight into this darkness in the first place. Perhaps, if Janette hadn't been available, and quite willing to act as temptress, LaCroix wouldn't have received the young knight's willing cooperation, both on the choice of vampirism and the willingness to share his young body with his master.

However much he cared for his daughter, when Janette was absent, was when he most enjoyed his Nicholas. Nicholas had always had such a deep abiding passion for life, and his sexuality was so abundantly expressed... LaCroix had long considered his son to be the most easily aroused creature he'd ever come across. There hadn't been anything exceptional about Janette, in spite of her beauty, in her being able to lure concentrated attention from Nicholas. But it took a while before both Janette and LaCroix realized their new disciple was a wanton: the innocent air was strictly surface. Beneath that surface was a handsome young man who delighted in each new sexual thrill learned, each new technique acquired, and each new excess explored. Nicholas didn't only utilize these chosen skills on his own family, either, which Janette always begrudged him. LaCroix, on the other hand, found it all quite charming, as Nicholas yearned for this person or that... Meanwhile, neither of them were ignored. Janette claimed to be, quite often, exhausted, while LaCroix realized his vampire strength, acquired through his great age, was what ensured he could keep up with his youthful one. Now, it was amazing to LaCroix, his insatiable Nicholas had actually, most definitely, become a practicing celibate, and for quite some time. This abstention, and the strength of will it required, was earning his grudging respect, though LaCroix would much rather have his own Nicholas back, in that regard. The boy was simply more fun, that way.

And, if he wasn't seducible any longer, what final hold would LaCroix have over his Nicholas, anyway? Never again to caress that skin, or look with wonder into those deep eyes... The prospect was too unbearable, which was why, upon nearly too matter-of-factly eliminating Nicholas' allegiance to him forever, he had begun this patient — and occasionally tiresome — game of waiting. Sooner or later, Nicholas was bound to find his way home. That went without saying. Especially since an old Roman named Lucius couldn't imagine existing without him. The barrenness of life was too horrible to consider.

Several days later, with another two bodies having been located, identified, autopsied, and buried, the case was blessedly and cooperatively being buried under paperwork. With the confusing and contradictory reports the coroners office was coming out with, there'd been a double-checking of the findings by one of Dr. Lambert's colleagues. With no new leads, and conflicting evidence, and without any new spark to ignite the news media, the case was being slowly allowed to dwindle to nothing.

When Nicholas woke towards the end of day, to face

this new night, there was a certain person, and a certain memory, now plaguing his mind: A serial killer, one LaCroix kept up an electronic correspondence with. The criminal was wise, and brought a certain event to mind. *"Hasn't there ever been anything so precious in your life, you couldn't let it go? So rare and beautiful, you felt compelled to protect it? Preserve it?"* There was a beautiful young woman, a wanton, really, whom LaCroix sought to cultivate. Her death wasn't to happen quickly; her seduction quite gradual. But Nicholas wanted to keep her for himself forever. In the end, he was the one to cause her death, not his master. Then, the criminal had added: *"And he waits. And he watches. There's pleasure in waiting, you know. Pleasure in the anticipation."* Was that what LaCroix had been up to since resettling in Toronto? And all the time young, beautiful women were disposable, when did LaCroix ever behave as if he — Nicholas — was? "Rare and beautiful?" Me?" Just the notion made Nick laugh.

When he got into work, he met up with his partner at their desks. "Hi, Nick," said Tracy. "Still listening to The Nutcracker?"

"What?" he laughed.

Mouth twisting, she apologized, "Sorry," and explained, "That Nightcrawler guy you like to listen to in the car. He claims to love everyone, but never has anything positive to say. A real ball breaker. Hence, The Nutcracker. Are you still a fan?"

Shuffling a bit in his seat, he conceded, "More an acquaintance than a fan. He has positive things to say. Regular listeners pick up on that."

The bleached blond immediately dropped the paper she'd been examining to say earnestly, "Sorry. I didn't know he was a friend of yours."

"He's not really a friend, either. In fact, I've barely met him." Schanke, his former partner, had known something of the relationship between Nick and LaCroix. "He's sort of my foster father, in a way. It's one of those old family connections," he'd once found himself explaining. But that was back in the days when Janette owned RAVEN and Nick could often be found there. Since Janette had abandoned the city, though Tracy frequented RAVEN, she was unlikely to know of Nick's relationship with her or LaCroix. LaCroix had done too many changes, even among the personnel of the club, for Tracy to hear mention of her. Even when Janette had reappeared on the scene recently, and Tracy was investigating the case, and seeing a link with her own partner, she'd never put two and two together, and didn't realize how vampires were involved in the murders. For

Tracy, The Nightcrawler was simply a dreary guy who spoke in the night and whom she may or may not know was the actual owner of the RAVEN.

Sometimes, Nicholas had to admit to himself he was a little too careful of his privacy. But Schanke had come so close, once, when guessing what Nicholas was, and the nature of his relationship with LaCroix and Janette. Though his father had rectified matters quite satisfactorily, Nicholas had been made aware what a close call it actually had been. Thus, this was one explanation for his continued wariness around his new partner, Detective Vetter. She knew of vampires, but Nicholas felt for himself and his family, the less she knew of him in particular, the better. Her friend, Vachon, didn't understand, but Nicholas didn't find it necessary he understand a thing: it was only essential Vachon keep the secret. As long as he did that, Vachon was secure from Nick's anger and LaCroix's wrath. Vachon could talk of other vampires, and often did, but the LaCroix family tree was off limits no matter what was going on within the community. *"Your family's still your family, even when they're trying to kill you,"* as Nick had once told Natalie.

But back to business. "Any bodies turn up in the last five minutes?" He grinned.

As usual, Tracy seemed relieved to be off the topic of her partner's personal life. "Not as far as I know." With ill-timed humor, she came out with what she perceived to be her own private joke. "I guess it's all dried up."

He had to stop himself from smiling again: After all, he wasn't supposed to know she was aware the more recent killings were vampire related, or that these would make for the total tally. "Gangland activity or something," he tossed in the bone.

"Sure." She seemed prepared to accept any explanation they could get away with.

He wondered if Natalie had any new leads; not that she would be trying to track down a vampire who was a killer. After all, what kind of punishment could you give a vampire? A life sentence? That is, assuming you could keep a vampire incarcerated in the first place. Let's see... With flying, hypnosis, and inhuman strength, not to mention a healthy diet of strong blood, keeping a vampire securely and humanely incarcerated would be far more trouble than it was worth. "We're gonna have to make up a whole new judicial system for you guys," she'd once speculated, "if your existence ever becomes public knowledge."

"For one thing, if our existence became public knowledge," he'd responded seriously, "we would be

hunted down. And even if we weren't, the only true and effective punishment for a vampire is death."

"Is that sentence ever carried out?" Her inquiring mind had been immediately on top of that, jumping the next step forward. "If so, by whom?" Sitting on his couch, she'd leaned forward, adding to her overall attitude of attentiveness. Whenever he spoke of the vampire community, she made sure not to miss a word.

"We have a unit called Enforcers. They punish vampires who are considered to have transgressed. The punishment is always death."

"Only vampires?" she'd probed, dubiously.

"It's a little more complicated than that. Everyone has to have a judicial branch of some sort, if only out of self-defense. Naturally, humans can't govern us. However," and she looked as if she was already anticipating his next words, "we can make judgments over them."

"The lawful killing of humans?"

"Something like that. It's more a purging, out of self-defense. The Enforcers are called in when the knowledge of our existence is at risk."

"Have you ever dealt with them?"

"I've never called them in, but I've faced them. Twice, they've nearly killed me. Once, LaCroix interceded. The other time, was a little more complicated."

"LaCroix could save you?"

"The longevity of a vampire is everything, Nat. We live by very old rules and customs, handed down from one generation of vampire to the next. A hundred-year-old vampire is only a baby; not even to be noticed. When you've survived over two millenniums, like LaCroix, that can be quite intimidating."

"How old are you, in terms of your community?"

He'd smiled. "Not one of the ancients. But not a youth, either. But since my lineage is strong, that gives me certain advantages."

"LaCroix," she'd breathed, newly in awe as she considered the history, the power, before her.

"LaCroix," he'd conceded. "He's created many children. I don't even know how many. Most of them, are forgotten about. He pays them no attention, unless he has a use for them. Janette is special to him; his favorite daughter."

"All those children you say he has, the ones he's created, and they are — presumably — all over the world. But you're the one he follows." And she was still thinking. After the moment he'd remained silent, "And the Enforcers, would they kill me if they knew about

me?"

"I don't know if anyone has informed them about you. You assist us, in concealing vampire related deaths. But you've been studying me, as a scientist. I doubt they are enthusiastic. I think they observe our situation with great care."

"But you're not concerned?" Nick had read her attitude: Obviously, if he wasn't, why should she be?

"I don't know for sure, but I think they know destroying you would also mean destroying me, and LaCroix would stand in their way. He is, no doubt, older than all of them, and therefore more powerful. As you've noticed, he can be quite intimidating."

He'd left her with that, quite a lot to think on, and fortunately she'd never raised the topic again, probably afraid of what other potentially horrific news he'd impart. Humans had, after all, invented the phrase **Ignorance is bliss**.

There were times he circumvented her questions, but most often he tried to answer honestly. Honesty is what she extended to him, after all, and he owed her that, at least. She gave him so much of herself, with her friendship, the time spent together, her caring, and her encouragement. Lying to her, or shutting her out, was something he only did when it was necessary, usually when sparing her in some way.

Tracy was coming back to his desk. "Nick, you're not going to believe this," and then she seemed to catch herself. "I mean, they've found another body."

He was dumbstruck. Surely Allsun had retired, as she was supposed to. And Tracy's reaction meant she'd probably been informed by Vachon the killings should be at an end. What now?

Natalie, it turned out, was called to the scene. She nodded to Nick, a seeming hello, but actually a signal the telltale marks were on the neck. Bending over the body, Tracy did her own visual examination and discovered the same evidence. It wouldn't be until the body was in the morgue, in the coroners custody, that Natalie would be able to instigate her magic and make the revealing little marks disappear. Tracy, of course, had no idea Natalie was accustomed to bending the oath of her office in this way.

With Schanke, this situation had never arisen. It wasn't that Nick disliked Tracy in any way, but he couldn't help wishing for the simpler days of his less proficient partner. Back then, he'd only had to worry his flying would be noticed.

"Um," Nick came to and realized his partner was speaking, "I think I'd better backtrack with a source. Is

that all right, Nick?"

So she was off to see Vachon. Just as well. "Sure thing, Trace." Back at RAVEN or Vachon's home? He might run the risk of running into her at RAVEN, but he needed to check with LaCroix about Allsun. Again.

Giving Tracy time to maneuver, Nick lingered with Natalie as the criminologist on the scene proceeded with the gathering of evidence, and the body was bagged and ready for transport to the coroners building. "See you," Natalie said, obviously aware why Nick would be putting in unnecessary time at the crime scene.

"I'll take care of it," he told her, "again."

RAVEN would be closing its doors within a couple of hours, but the night life in Toronto, especially the non-Human variety, was still in high gear. Looking around carefully, just in case Tracy should happen to be on the premises, Nick was relieved neither his partner nor her pal were in attendance. He looked through the glass of the broadcast booth, and his father was already gazing back at him. It was only mildly disturbing to Nick, how his father's sensitivity to his presence was much less erratic than Nick's sensitivity to LaCroix. Many times Nick relied on that sensitivity, that awareness beyond the subliminal level, to get him out of a jam.

The booth door wasn't locked, it never was, and Nick turned the knob and went right in. "Who says love doesn't conquer all?" is the question LaCroix was posing to the cosmos as he strode in. "Here's some music with which to ponder that question." And the button was pressed, and Nick gave a smile as his father's attention was all on him. "You look troubled, Nicholas."

"There's been another killing," Nicholas announced, without preamble. If it was abrupt, that was his normal manner when conducting business with his master.

"**Killing** as opposed to **murder**. At least you've got the term correct. You're wondering if it's Allsun?"

"She is still here?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. It would be possible to find out. But why should we?"

"We are in a different time," Nick argued. "We cannot be piling up human remains. Where are the Enforcers? Why haven't they been called in to handle this?"

"Allsun is hardly a rogue vampire. And she has great power. But, really, Nicholas, I did explain the vendetta to you. It's entirely possible she is operating with their approval."

"The Enforcers would destroy the evidence. They wouldn't leave human bodies to be discovered and the cause of death determined."

"How true. But you're overlooking one salient fact — in this city your Dr. Lambert is known to make our indiscretions far more discreet. On the other hand," LaCroix held up a hand as his son would have interrupted, "I don't believe Enforcers would leave evidence lying around. If Allsun is operating with their permission, there are aspects of this situation of which I'm sure they have no knowledge. Leave me to handle it, Nicholas. They already know you too well." The last thing he wanted was the presence of his controversial son complicating the issue. Old grievances might be brought to the fore. Sometimes it was difficult enough, casting this shadow of protection over his erstwhile son. The Enforcers were crude and animal-like, bred from human imbeciles for just this purpose. Dumb animals is what they were, best for the type of function in which they served. Subtlety was not appreciated by them, not with the issues they dealt with. Dispatching an Enforcer was not something one did lightly, not even LaCroix, not even on behalf of this indulged child of his. "This is beyond the concern of a Toronto homicide detective."

Ignoring the snub, as any caution from his father was usually well-advised, Nicholas merely nodded. Then, "Let me know what you find out."

"That goes without saying. I'll come to you before sunrise, and — hopefully — be out of your home before I'm stuck there for the day. We wouldn't want a repeat performance of the other night, now would we?"

And Nick wondered about that, as he returned to the precinct, his radio, as usual, tuned to The Nightcrawler's station. How many times had it seemed to Nick his master could travel during the day, receiving no ill effects, when Nick would have suffered a third degree burn, at least, under the same conditions. And yet the other day, hadn't LaCroix been incarcerated with him?

When he let himself into his home towards morning, a little earlier than usual since he was awaiting LaCroix, Nick found the suspect of his latest case in ostentatious attendance. She was sitting at his piano, fingers lightly flirting over the keys, a crystal glass and a bottle of one of the special vintages served at RAVEN sitting atop the polished expanse of wood.

"Hello, Nicholas. You look enchanting, as usual."

It quickly entered his mind he usually did receive the odd second glance or two when wearing his black leather jacket, but then he brought himself up short. "I've been wanting to talk with you again. I wasn't expecting you to make yourself at home."

"We couldn't really talk freely at your office, could we?" Sliding off the piano bench, she came to join him

near the couch.

Nick was busy shrugging off his jacket, no longer interested whether he looked 'enchanting' or not. "I suppose not," he conceded. "Did LaCroix send you over?"

There was a flash of fire in her eyes, to match her hair, and a bite in her tone. "No one sends me, Nicholas. Not even LaCroix."

"Oh. That wasn't the impression you were giving earlier. I'd invite you to stay for dinner, but I see you've already eaten." Moving to the kitchen, he was reaching for his own refrigerated bottle, wondering — for the life of him — what it was he was doing? Was he deliberately trying to ensure her lack of cooperation by his deliberate — if not consciously motivated — antagonistic attitude? Trying to get back on track, he addressed her more approachably, "Thank you for coming. I was needing to talk with you in an official capacity."

"Vampire cop." Her smile was back.

He went on without preamble, "LaCroix thought the vendetta you were involved in would be completed by now. But we have another body to be accounted for."

"Since you're obviously not going to arrest me for the crime, I have no trouble admitting my guilt. Not to all of them, however. They're not all mine." Casually, she moved to the couch and sat, curling her legs atop the cushion. "However, I do know who is responsible, and LaCroix was anticipating somewhat, when he told you the vendetta was completed, but it is now fact: the house has been cleaned. They're all dead, so everyone's happy."

It occurred to him her sense of humor was a bit off, similar to Janette's. "There are some ground rules to this city. Since I work homicide division, I do need to know when a death is vampire related. That simply prevents me — and others — wasting our time chasing our tails. But, as should always be considered, the perpetrator must clean up after himself. We cannot afford to risk identification."

"I thought that was what your doctor friend was for."

How would she have gotten the information on Natalie? From the Enforcers? Assuming, of course, the Enforcers knew about Natalie. "That is not to be considered, let alone taken for granted," he cautioned.

"I see. However, I am in agreement with you. These bodies were an exception. I doubt the same situation will arise again. It was the coincidence, how after all these years, you, LaCroix and I would all be occupying the same place and time. It was too much temptation, really, with your being a homicide detective. I couldn't resist the urge to play with you a bit. Unfortunately, one of my

associates went a little overboard and decided to play the game the same way."

"I'm surprised the Enforcers let you get away with it?" he challenged, wondering if his guess would prove accurate.

"I'm sure you've learned through your experience with LaCroix, that anyone who counts their age by the millennium is not to be underestimated. We have quite an influence, even with rebellious sons such as yourself. You are quite infamous, you know."

"That, I do not believe." But he pondered it all the same. It was true, wherever he went, whenever he ran into others of his kind, they all seemed to know who he was. Even the blond barmaid he'd thought he'd killed, only to find out LaCroix had saved her by bringing her across, wasn't it true she couldn't come after him for revenge until her master's protective influence was out of the way? Somehow, Nick had never quite believed her story of having been hunting him through the centuries. Too often, he'd experienced how easily vampires kept track of his movements and LaCroix's, even though they kept to themselves. Here, because of RAVEN, the vampire haven Janette had established, was the first time LaCroix was extensively associating with their own kind. Even now, Nick was known to both vampire and human acquaintances as a loner.

"Now you are being deliberately foolish. Or truly naive. You must have had occasion to realize your own infamy within the community. As LaCroix's only acknowledged son, even though he has brought across other males, you are in a special class. The speculation about you two is tremendous." She gazed at him consideringly. "Perhaps he kept you — or you kept yourself — too sheltered."

"No one's even sure who you are. You're a fine one to talk about being sheltered. What family do you have?"

"That, I will not go into. But it intrigues you, does it not? How many times have I given my blood, and who to? Have there only been vampire lovers, or have I brought someone across? My young one, you will never know. But I can offer you a piece of the puzzle."

He stiffened, frowning. "You're offering me a taste of your blood?"

"Of course. You are young and beautiful. We have shared the same lover, have we not? Why not share each other? Except for LaCroix, whose life force have you ever had which would be as fine as mine?"

He was instantly tempted, but he came out with a meek protest. "You're only wanting me to get back at him. Somehow, he'll guess or you'll tell him."

"Don't you want to get back at him, as well? All those years of confinement he put you through. Isolating you, so you would only have him to rely upon. Most families do not operate as yours do, my dear. We learn to rely on each other as members of a community. That is why Enforcers were established. You and LaCroix, though, have customarily relied only upon each other."

He said only, "We've done well that way."

"You've survived. But that is because of LaCroix's influence. No doubt you've discovered for yourself he is virtually indestructible. At our age, it is exceedingly difficult to extinguish the life force. I think only a beheading would work on me. And I'm not even sure that would. I do not, of course, intend to find out." She held out her hand, and Nick didn't flinch away as she cupped his cheek. "You are not in the same fortunate position. You have rare beauty, and intelligence, and fine qualities. But you are weak for your age. Being LaCroix's son, in particular, you've learned to rely upon his strength. But your vulnerability drains his strength. Your vulnerability becomes his." She was speaking almost hypnotically, as if forgetting this was a fellow vampire and one who couldn't be affected by such tricks. "If you fed on him more often, your vulnerability would lessen. But his control over you would increase. If you fed on me, on the other hand, I could claim no control over you as we have no bond at all. Yet, your strength would still increase."

"Why offer me your blood?"

"Having someone as lovely as you would be reward enough."

"And LaCroix?" he snapped.

"Do you care?"

He found it had been too long, after all, since he'd allowed himself to indulge in such passion. She was a witch; she was tempting. A blood as rich as hers, with her desire and her age. Her power. It was on offer, and he found himself unable — unwilling — to refuse.

His fangs distended, and his eyes changed, becoming darker, ravenous with his need. He pulled her forward, and she let it happen, not pulling away and striking at him for the temerity. Immediately he went for her neck, but to nuzzle, to kiss, to lick, not biting, not yet. His lips dragged over her ear, onto the forehead. She sighed, her own fangs probably distended, but he wasn't looking for that. Then he put his mouth against hers, and that's when he felt the fangs, his tongue sliding over them, their harsh sensitivity what he required for the final arousal. He had no interest in taking her to bed, this was going to be too hot and abrupt a scene for all that, and he absently

noted she wasn't pulling at his clothing, as well.

Then his mouth was back at her throat, which was arched, and his teeth sank in. She gasped, but not with pain. Then he felt the movement and the puncturing of his own skin. They were exchanging blood now, in a feeding frenzy. And her blood was just as hot and rich as he'd anticipated.

But something was wrong, and the sudden shimmer he felt along the length of his spine told the story of what it was. LaCroix. He'd forgotten LaCroix was coming over.

He and Allsun must have felt the tension in the atmosphere at the same moment, for they fell away from each other in concert, in guilt.

He was standing there, his neatly shorn head dark in the sparse lighting. But the features, that pale skin, was taut. The eyes were their normal pale blue, however, and the fangs weren't distended. LaCroix was furious, obviously so, but it was a human fury. He hadn't — yet — allowed the beast to take control.

Not intimidated at all, Allsun was immediately cheerful. "I wonder what you've done with him, LaCroix? He never wanted me at all, but he dearly wanted revenge upon you. It is remarkable, is it not? His blood is too light, poor quality because of his choice of food, but the glorious physique more than makes up for it."

"Allsun," LaCroix was exercising the patience he wasn't well known for, "I had a prior engagement, so I'm late, but I suggest you leave here immediately." All the time, his gaze never left his son's face.

"Actually, Lucien, this may surprise you, but I see no reason to stay. I have achieved what I wanted, after all. Victory, my dear general, is mine." In a flash, she was gone, and the two males were left facing each other.

Nick tried being defiant, but it wasn't working. As LaCroix stepped up to him, eyes cold and intent, he merely rose and stood to face him. When the powerful hand connected with his face, his head sprang back, but there was no real pain. He took a step back, and that's when he gained firm resolve.

In the meantime, LaCroix had regained his temper. He knew the pain he felt in striking his son was more than his son would have felt on receiving the blow. "Why must you always provoke me?"

"I, provoke you?"

LaCroix turned away, so sad all of a sudden, he was nearly in tears. "Every moment since I created you, you've sought to challenge me." He turned back to face his son. "Why, Nicholas? I've never understood why?

Anyone else would have considered what I gave you a gift."

Now he had his master's complete subjugation, Nicholas found he didn't want it after all. He realized, all of a sudden, that deliberate causing of pain, to someone he was so close to, closer than anyone, was a sickness: The evil he sought to eliminate in his father. It was in him, as well, he always knew it was. But, perhaps, he'd been mistaken all along in thinking the evil in him was part of his being a vampire. Maybe the evil was part of him from the time before... Didn't humans believe evil was in every man? Perhaps he was too young and foolish, or arrogant, to recognize the evil in him that was there all along. The evil that was counter to the innocence which had attracted LaCroix. "The gift of eternity; of being without conscience." He must have been out of his mind, to take Allsun's gift, which wasn't a gift at all. But the lure had been powerful; to drink of that same well as the man he called master.

"You have a conscience, Nicholas. It's up to you whether or not you utilize it, or how you utilize it. I have simply given you the choice, extended over a longer period of time than mortals are capable of."

"The gift," Nick was wondering at it, still unsettled over the course the night had taken.

"I saw you. I loved you. I gave you everything I was capable of giving. But you turned against me. How many of your brothers do I address as son?" He answered his own question. "No one, Nicholas. There's been no one else who's had your place."

"Humans can always provide the excuse of a headache. But I need to sit down." Nick moved away.

Needing time to gather his thoughts and himself together, LaCroix moved as well, to the kitchen, where he knew some of that horrible cows blood was stocked. Retrieving two glasses, he returned to the living area to find his son lounging casually with his blond head against the backrest. "Here, have something."

Almost laughing, Nick cut short with a smile, and lifting his head, he accepted a glass.

"I told you I'd be by." Quietly, LaCroix continued the interrogation with, "Did you forget?"

"Well, I guess we don't need answers to those questions anymore. Allsun confessed. Sort of."

"At least your sense of humor is returning."

"What other part of me are you missing?"

"Don't tease, Nicholas. I think we have quite enough trouble between us."

"You want me back?"

"Would you believe, I'm actually considering it?"

The thought of his son's making love to his former lover was too intrusive, as yet, for him to consider forgiving him. Nicholas could look convincingly innocent, and did so at will, but there were times his rebellious son strayed over that invisible line. A few times, in the past, it had caused their separation. Other times, Nicholas had been intent on proclaiming his independence. Regardless, they always found their way back to each other. And they would be lovers and companions again, inseparable, until the tension of their intense relationship would get the better of them. But after nearly eight hundred years, it was a tiring state of affairs. And all that time his son was searching to be human again. For what purpose? The momentary satisfaction of living a **normal** life, with barbecues and children and mowing the lawn? Within a couple of years, a few at best, Nicholas would tire of the situation and want to abandon it. After all, Nicholas ignored his own vampire offspring; a terrible parent, he was, avoiding all responsibility. "Before, I've always wanted you back instantly, incessantly. But, now, you may have worn me down. Or this latest transgression has overcome me. I find I do not even crave the taste of your blood anymore, and it used to be such an intoxicant, I'd become aroused just at the thought of it."

Tension caught the blue eyes as Nicholas fought his instinctive panic. He'd always had his father available to him. It was unthinkable he'd be left on his own. Hadn't it always been true, as nearly as possible, LaCroix would achieve orgasm merely by bestowing upon his son a taste of his ancient life force? That act of giving, of benediction, that intimacy... It never affected Nick to such an extent, having anyone drink from him. He usually sought to deny his master his blood. The refusal was power in itself. Calmly, though, Nick stated, "You can't intend to leave me." But his tone wasn't that confident. Perhaps, this time, he had gone too far. It was true, sometimes, he didn't know what was wrong with him.

For a moment, LaCroix merely contemplated this unusual offspring of his. "Would you really care, Nicholas? You once nearly wanted me out of your life so badly, you attempted to kill me. You even thought you had succeeded. Overconfidence on your part, perhaps, and lack of experience with how powerful someone of my age can be. You were not pleased when I returned."

"What displeased me," Nicholas was realizing as he said this, "was knowing how much I'd missed you. Janette would tell me how you'd loved me, and I wouldn't answer her. I couldn't bare the guilt, or thinking how you'd never return. I sought relief from the

pain, the knowledge of the pain, by remembering only the bad times between us." He stared at the red fire liquid in the glass, his life contained in the palm of his hand, as if searching for his answers there.

"So that's what poisoned you upon my return. I admit I was after revenge, my power play against yours, but I was astounded at the ferocity of your bitterness."

Nick acknowledged, "It was anger with myself. You've often warned me of the consequences of self-delusion."

Could his son finally — yet again? — be warning to him? Finally seeing things from his point-of-view? But he'd never threatened to leave Nicholas before. Never threatened to abandon his son. Nicholas' inconvenient defiance was something he was usually forced to swallow along with his pride, if he was going to have his son back at all.

Shaking his head at his own folly, LaCroix held out a hand to stroke the blond hair, standing over this child of his, looking down into the drawn features. "What do you offer to coax me into staying with you?"

The eyes opened, staring upwards to find, not the ceiling, but passive blue eyes awaiting his decision. "Would this be enough?" He had lifted his hand to grasp the one at his head. Joined, he felt the strength in this hand which had struck him earlier, but there was no wrath evident now. Only comfort.

Unsurprised at the offer, LaCroix reminded his son, "You haven't wanted that in some time."

"But I've missed it," quietly Nick assured him. "I've missed you."

"It's dawn," LaCroix observed.

"Yes, it is," Nick agreed.

Not releasing his grip, LaCroix bent so he could join his mouth to his son's. After a moment, Nick reached up, parting his lips, holding the other's face to his. Parting, for the moment necessary, he said, "Let's go upstairs."

It was in the human fashion they embraced, even walking up the stairs, as if savoring each extra moment. Vampire lovemaking could be too coarse and hurried; what they desired was reaffirmation.

They undressed swiftly, and separately, accustomed to each other's habits.

Gazing upon the black sheets with a small reflective smile, LaCroix commented, "It pleases me how you remember I favor you in black."

It wasn't only because of his master's preference Nick was partial to black, but he wouldn't dare acquaint LaCroix with that fact.

The bed coverings were to provide a normal

appearance to the bed. Nick was rarely under the covers; more generally on top. But he usually wore pajamas. With his lover present, that wasn't a necessity.

They were both nude, and LaCroix came up to him, placing a hand to the side of his son's face. "I know I made sure to keep you forever, but it pleases me to note your beauty is unchanged."

"Thanks to you," Nick acknowledged the gift of eternity he'd been given, something he usually scorned. "I do appreciate this gift. I know you meant it for good. You had no way of knowing..." he stopped himself there. "Now is the time for love, and not the old argument." He took the hand in his and led his father to the mattress. "Love me as I know you do. I will love you as best I am able."

They embraced, long lingering kisses sealing the pact they rarely admitted to. As the stroking grew more heated, their eyes changed with the passion unleashed, and they each emitted growls from their throats, betraying the beasts they were, as they sought fulfillment which could only be achieved by the exchange of blood.

"Take me," Nick groaned, offering his neck, knowing his lover would offer his in turn. Their bodies grappled, seeking a new sensation, a new thrill, but more than content with the familiar.

LaCroix bit into the fair throat, receiving just as much gratification when Nicholas bit into his.

They rolled atop the mattress, intent on intensifying their closeness, until finally Nick pulled away from his lover, finding himself on top, a position they both favored. With LaCroix's blood already in him, the next movement was easy. Finding LaCroix's erect penis beneath him, Nick straddled him, taking the penis into his cavity.

LaCroix let his son have complete control, riding him, thrilled to watch his beloved's face, the flushed features and bright eyes. No longer in vampire mode, Nicholas was attempting to experience as much of human passion as possible. LaCroix enjoyed the sight of his son trying to experience all that sexual heat. The urge for sensation was the only thing occupying the police detective now.

Finally, Nicholas collapsed atop his father, a bite into the shoulder providing the release he required. LaCroix waited until his son was done, then he, too, turned his mouth to the task of achieving orgasm.

Their bodies wet with the emission of blood, Nick, self-contained again, pulled away, stating, "This can't happen all the time. My life is different now. But, for now, it's something I very much wanted." His voice was

filled with the restraint he usually practiced.

LaCroix was dismayed, but, "Touch me, Nicholas, if this is all the time I have left with you. That's the only command I'll make of you this day."

A smile tempted Nick's well-formed lips. Softly, he confessed, "Your commands — in our bed — were never difficult for me to follow." True to the request, his hand began pressing against the broad expanse of chest. As if in heady response, his shoulders were suddenly seized by a force stronger than him, and Nick was pulled down, to lie chest against chest, firm hairless flesh against firm hairless flesh. A moment after, Nick's mouth was captured by the other's with such fierce passion, they were each left breathless, lips bruised against harsh teeth.

"It's been too long, Nicholas," LaCroix was warning his son, while stroking the fine hair to the side of Nick's face. "So many years since you haven't pulled away from my touch." As the dark blue eyes stared intently into his own, LaCroix explained, "I keep fighting the desire to crush you to me; to never let you go. This evil is what you run from, and I don't know if I can control it."

Having begun to worry, Nick now felt relief. "It was never your passion in bed I considered evil. It was your attempt to control me outside of it." Quickly, Nick leaned down, gave a swift kiss to the other's swollen red mouth and pulled away again. "Besides, don't you think I've always realized it was I who had the ultimate power here? This is my domain."

LaCroix grasped a firm buttock with his right hand. "I see. In this, your domain, you are the evil one."

Nick pulled off him, laying beside the other, taking a moment to peer at the ceiling. "That hasn't only just occurred to you."

LaCroix leaned over him, looking upon the handsome features. He had to admit to himself, for all the drama of their relationship, he couldn't have chosen more wisely. "Before I became your master, I was already your slave."

The words had been delivered with so little expression, such lightness, it took a moment for their meaning to penetrate. When they did, Nick turned his head, gazing wide-eyed into the more considerate ones of his lover. "Oh, yes," LaCroix sought to impress upon his son. "I picked you out from all the others because of your beauty. But what intrigued me, what held me in thrall, was how swiftly your purity would become depravity, then back again." The muscles along Nick's left side twitched as LaCroix stroked the length of him. Eyes tracing the movements of his hand, LaCroix continued, "Janette underestimated you. I did not."

"Yes, you did." But Nick couldn't help flexing with

the continued motion against his body. Automatically, his legs splayed, the thighs opening a passageway to encourage the other's attention. "You should have known, in trying to keep me a child forever, as your prisoner, you'd only drive me away from you."

Almost absently, the father responded, "What parent doesn't try to encourage youthfulness in his child? Your education was my responsibility."

This last was stated rather breathlessly, and the betrayed vulnerability was fine by Nick, as he succumbed to a desire he hadn't betrayed in a very long time: "Love me," he said to the master he'd thought he'd destroyed not too long ago.

LaCroix frowned into the receptive features, knowing this was the best chance he'd ever have to say it: "I always do." The murmur was loud enough for Nick to hear, and the eyes unglazed enough so LaCroix knew the message had been understood. Then a beatific smile lit the handsome features of his son, as Nicholas teased, "Prove it." And LaCroix did so, finishing their day with, "Remember what I told you, Nicholas. *We are each other. You will always be mine. Eternally.*"

The End

Set Me Free

You claim
that you love me
but I
find this hard to believe.

Your possessiveness
suffocates me
destroys what you cherish.
Let me live my life!
If you love me, LaCroix
then set me free!

And maybe
one day
I'll come back.

07 September 1996
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St. Valentine's Vampire

by

- Elizabeth Stuart -

LaCroix

Lucien LaCroix brooded. It was a pastime he generally savored, but tonight it gave him no satisfaction.

His heart — the one he'd wished barricaded from human pain, the one Nicolas believed he lacked — ached. The feeling was at once both unbelievably painful and incredibly glorious. Emotions were messy pools that he both avoided and exulted in, depending on his moods. Tonight he lost himself in them, reliving — *an ironic phrase, that* — the minutes he'd spent watching Nicolas caress the banal mortal woman. The pain had been so exquisite that he'd bit his wrist, suckling at his own flesh for gratification, losing several heated moments in a haze of ecstasy that was all the more alive for the hatred he felt for the woman.

And, then, he'd almost had her. Almost claimed that which Nicolas wished to possess. But the living flame that was his child had interfered, asserting dominion in the guise of indifference. Hypocrisy? Had Nicolas truly believed his mentor could be so easily deceived? *You, mon fils, could no more use that woman than you could use... me.*

LaCroix smiled faintly. Nicolas, so greedy, so full of demands and expectations. In all his many years, Lucien had never been used as fully as Nicolas used him. The child could safely deny the truth, of course, because the words had never been uttered: *I need you, LaCroix, I want you, I must have you, you must do all, be all, for me, and I will be your slave.... Forever.* Nicolas thought he remained safe because he disguised his feelings with other words: *Why do you do this, do that for me, I want, give me, don't do it, wait....*

Don't take my sister.

But what did Nicolas offer him in return for all these services?

LaCroix had adored Fleur when she was alive; now he held her in his heart as a talisman, flashed her reality

at Nicolas when the boy probed too intimately and reached too near his soul. The youngster had never questioned LaCroix's love for his sister; had he sensed the truth even then?

Why *wouldn't* Lucien have loved Fleur? Her tantalizing purity, her glowing face, the adoration in her eyes.... She had been his Nicolas in female form, offering what Nicolas withheld, pleading instead of taunting. Newly brought across, Nicolas had only surrendered his innocence; his heart had remained — *stilt* remained — cold and unyielding, refusing the final capitulation that would both burn and freeze him for eternity. Until....

The question: Did Nicolas realize what he — what they both — felt?

Blink, and they'll all be gone.

LaCroix leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, searching his memory. What had Nicolas said to that woman? *...Beautiful things*, she'd murmured, mesmerized... but were they her memories or the ones he wanted for his own? Ironic, that he chose to love that which danced out of reach but always lingered nearby, tempting him with promises rarely fulfilled. *For you, Nicola, I spared the mortal woman... or would you have truly brought her across had I not relented?*

My son... remembers the blood we've shared and dreams of me, hears my words in his sleep even when I do not call for him. I hear his need and, docile as a shepherd chasing an errant, precious lamb, I follow him. But Nicolas is a lamb with fangs, one who has sought to murder me to secure the freedom he thinks he will bring him bliss — never acknowledging that his happiness is here, where it has always been. Fool! You toss aside an eternal bond and search for a dream, a child endlessly wishing for adulthood. And when one day you find the blinding brilliance of that dream, you will run from it, howling like the creature of the night that you are.

Nicolas de Brabant, a dichotomy of gentleness and

savagery, strength and fragility. His mind was so simple to read. A day did not pass that Nicolas did not think of him — and, admittedly, he thought of Nicolas far too often. But his feelings were tinged with bitterness at his son's ingratitude, his willfulness, his cruelty. The deliberate obtuseness Nicolas hid behind, the ineffectual lies that were his only shelter from the truth. *You broke my heart*, Nicolas whispered once, fiercely. *Only love can break a heart*, LaCroix had replied, and Nicolas turned away as if hiding his face would hide the truth. *I will leave you*, he'd threatened and, under his own rage, LaCroix had felt amusement at the feeble assertion of an independence neither of them wanted or needed.

Idly, he lifted the single ivory rose from the table at his side and twirled it between thumb and forefinger. Beautiful, like both his children; beautiful like Fleur. But the thorn that pierced his flesh was purely Nicolas.

A droplet of blood darkened his skin, and he touched his tongue to it. Poor Nicola, forever enslaved by the bite of his master's verbal whip. Begging to be chastised, longing for punishment... then decrying the discipline with anguished accusations of betrayal. A mass of conflicting needs and impulses, that was his child.

How well I have come to know you, he whispered into the night, and felt Nicolas's shivering acknowledgement.

I am not coming back to you.

You have never left, my Nicola. Forever....

Another time... and what had been the words that night? *Why don't you do for David what you would never do for me — let him go.*

A cold beauty it is who has never known the insanity that flawless love and wild passion combined can bring. Let him go....

Don't ever give them your heart — fine advice which I cannot follow myself; it is too late for me; it was too late the moment I saw his delicious, frail mortality, and he lifted his eyes to mine.

Kill the pain... this incessant longing. Nicolas, may you burn in hell!

And he touches her. Kisses, lips brushing, teasing, seeking fulfillment —

For this betrayal, I would kill you... if I dared.

If I cared to live without you.

The whirring sound of the elevator disturbed his reverie. Nicolas....

Nicolas, his son... sensed his presence.

And he came.

With a half-smile, LaCroix looked across the room at his offspring, giving his child the challenge they both craved. He spread one arm in a welcoming gesture, opened his hand in offering.

And he came. His gaze brushed LaCroix.

A silent scream of endless pain... some of us live our lives within that single scream.

This night, you will live with it also. And after that will come... Forever.

Nicolas

Nick froze his expression into one of icy rage, hoping to hide the fear that pounded in his dead heart. "You promised!" he hissed, though he kept his fangs retracted. This was not the moment to push LaCroix into a display of wrath. He lifted his chin regally and glared.

His mentor smiled slightly and closed his fist around the golden brown hair that slid across his hand. "And what is the value of a promise, Nicolas, unless the possibility exists that it will be broken? The lovely Natalie came to me. Surely you would not expect me to reject her? It would be too cruel."

He snarled — at Nat as much as at LaCroix. Why had she come and put them both in danger? "If she came here and you did not abduct her for your own purposes, then she came to see *me*. This is my home."

"Your lair," the older vampire corrected smoothly. "And what is yours is also mine. Surely you have not forgotten our most basic rule. We cannot exist without each other. We protect one another, we share —"

"That has nothing to do with Natalie."

"Does it not? You put so many restrictions on me...." The pale hand caressed Nat's throat, running down the length of it and back, crawling across her cheekbone, touching her mouth. "I hunger, Nicola." With a wicked smile, LaCroix bent and licked her lips.

Wild emotions cascaded around Nick — fury, terror, raging desire. He was immobilized by the conflicts, by the truths he did not wish to see inside himself.

LaCroix looked up, the pale eyes glittering. "I will share her with you," he offered, his voice soft and rich with meaning.

Nick inhaled sharply, turning his head aside. His fists clenched, nails digging into palms as he tried to distract himself, to turn off these mad desires that he

couldn't — shouldn't — mustn't fulfill. To be human meant — He twisted his body around to face the black windows, to remind himself of his goal. But what did it mean to be human? The sun — He was losing his thoughts in this whirlwind of vampiric needs. Natalie... to have her, finally, and to have LaCroix with her, sharing her blood, his blood, their blood. The ultimate union, what had always been lacking with Janette, what he hadn't felt since...

...Fleur.

He'd thought of her tonight and had known LaCroix thought of her even before the veiled words had revealed her ghostly presence. Somewhere in the depths of his mind, he'd known what would happen the night he'd brought LaCroix to his sister. Had known his mentor would desire her, yet would, ultimately, bow to his decree that she should remain mortal. He'd wanted that moment of control over his master. Control and revenge. His immortal soul had been given away too easily, he'd been seduced without the luxury of contemplation. LaCroix had taken him, body and soul, and claimed ownership of Nicolas de Brabant. But Nick Knight was... what? A free man? No, he was as much LaCroix's slave as he had ever been. More so now, perhaps, because he so desperately wanted his freedom.

"It is not freedom you crave, my child." The words rolled across the room, thick fog to ensnare him. He could not resist their allure.

"No? What then?" he asked sharply. He did not really care for LaCroix's opinion; he sought only to stall for time until he could free Natalie.

LaCroix laughed as though he read that thought. "Such childish games you play, my Nicola," he murmured obscurely.

"Get to the point, LaCroix," Nick muttered viciously, awash in the desire and loathing he felt for this man who had both ended and begun his life.

The man sighed and wrapped Nat's long, thick hair around his hand, using it to lift her face and study it. "Enslavement is what drives you. Your own — and that you could use to capture others. You wish to enrapture this good doctor, Nicolas — admit that desire."

"I don't wish to enslave anyone. I'm not you."

"But you are, Nicolas... you are."

He paced to the refrigerator and opened it, reached for the bottle of cool animal blood, then drew his hand away. It would not satisfy him tonight. LaCroix, Natalie... they'd opened the wound that never healed and now it bled again, this terrible craving for human

sustenance, the rush of emotions that he would take with the blood. To have Natalie's feelings and needs intermingle with LaCroix's, to have them both, to drink fully, to slake this desire that set his body on edge... Just once, why couldn't he have it? The emotional blessings they would share, the sexual satisfaction of body and mind. It had been so long since he'd felt it. It wasn't the same with Janette; both her blood and her body were beautiful, but she was his sister, she was Fleur, and their closeness enhanced his desires without satisfying them. Natalie —

"Is but a tool," LaCroix murmured. "A bridge. A link between us. A third ingredient in this volatile mixture — you know what human blood adds, Nicolas! Why do you deny yourself?"

His world was spinning, and he lost himself in the vortex. Turning, baring fangs, snarling — he was himself again, Vampire, and leapt on LaCroix, shoving the human aside. He sunk his teeth into the artery under his master's ear, fingers closing on the throat, squeezing, pumping the life-giving blood. He drank, long draughts that renewed his energy and sent his spirit soaring. His connection was broken as the other's fangs sunk into his own neck; frustrated, Nick grabbed LaCroix's arm and bit the inside of his elbow. The flavor was different, but the nourishment pulsed forth, and he buried himself in the murky images in LaCroix's mind: his life, his prey, his children, possessive and bountiful, greedy and generous, always distant, always near. The older vampire drank fast, draining him; after a moment, LaCroix pulled his fangs free and cradled Nick's head, offering his throat as a mother would her teat. Nick drank again, desert-starved for the water of life.

Something new mixed into the experience, something alien, something familiar. *Fleur!* With a painful wrench, Nick drew back, unthinkingly licked the blood from his lips. LaCroix had his fangs locked into her wrist.

"Nooo!" His sister — his mother depended on him to save his sister! If her innocence was lost... what hope would there ever be for mankind? Or for a single man? He would spare his sister —

And he would not *share* with his sister!

He grappled with the vampire, struggling to free LaCroix's hold, offering his own blood instead, warm and tantalizing. He tore open his own wrist, thrust it against the rapacious mouth, tempting the feeder away from the puny mortal who had so little to offer, while he — *he*, Nicolas de Brabant, offered fire, salvation,

worship, death and resurrection again and again —

He succeeded! Triumph renewed him. He had the one he hated and loved, despised and honored. *LaCroix!* he screamed into their souls, and in response, he was claimed and cherished beyond human imagining. *This* was what he'd felt all those centuries ago when he was first owned by Lucien — *this* had been worth dying for.

But he had not died; he'd lived and would live eternally. Here, in this place, slave to his master.

Feeding slowed, passion grew. Clothes ripped with inhuman strength, cast aside. Hands, legs, smooth curves, sinewy muscles, demands that scorched his flesh in ways more terrible than the deadly sun ever could. Mind possessed first (*Forever*, came the promise/threat), then body. *My father*, Nick breathed, a small gift to the one he could never satisfy. *My master, my slave... you are all things.*

A rumble of pleased laughter shook him; he could feel it where their bodies joined, hear it in the emptiness of his chest, devour it in the heat of the other's mouth. And when, finally spent, he lay weakly in the grip of the hands that curved over hips and buttocks, he lifted his eyes.

Fleur?

Fleur!

She stared at them, mesmerized with horror, her innocence slaughtered as surely as if he'd allowed *LaCroix* to have her. Tears flowed down her cheeks, bright blood flecked her lips where she'd bitten them in an agony *Nicolas* could feel as if it were his own.

"*Fleur!*" He meant to scream denial, but it came out a whisper, a plea.

She turned away, crying, touching the wound on her neck. "How could you, my dear brother? I loved *Lucien*, and you took him from me! Took him for *yourself!* Oh, cruel man — Nay, cruel world! I will live in it no longer!"

Before he understood her words, she ran past them, across the sleeping garden toward the precipice.

Nicolas De Brabant threw back his head and howled.

Fleur

Her brother, her beloved brother — and her beloved! Too much to comprehend. Locked in an unholy embrace, coupling like dogs, horribly white

bodies streaked with red, drinking blood, touching — Her *Lucien* taking *Nicolas* the way she had wished to be taken! *Nicolas*, the words that came from his mouth, ones that urged further obscenities!

Never!

Nicolas raised his head and stared at her. She turned away from his confused eyes, sobbing. All was lost. "How could you, my dear brother? I loved *Lucien*, and you took him from me! Took him for *yourself!* Oh, cruel man — Nay, cruel world! I will live it in no longer!"

Before he could understand her words and prevent the act she must take, she ran past them, across the sleeping garden toward the precipice.

The last thing she heard was a terrible baying as though the Wolf of the Night had risen to pursue her. Then...

...she forgot.

Natalie

She screamed, startled awake by the intensity of a nightmare. She sat upright in her bed, but —

It was not her bed. Was she... still in the nightmare? *Nat* stared. She was in *Nick's* apartment, and two bodies were sprawled on the floor. The room smelled of sweat and blood and sex. Her breath came in harsh gasps, and she made no effort to control them. She could only... stare.

Her friend, her beloved! Too much to comprehend. Locked in an unholy embrace, coupling like dogs, horribly white bodies streaked with red, drinking blood, touching — Her *Nicolas* being taken the way she had begged him to take her. *Nicolas*, the words that came from his mouth, ones that urged further obscenities.

With the objectivity of a coroner, she examined the crime scene for more details. *Nick* was naked, his body unnaturally pale, sleek and wet like the underbelly of a shark, slick with blood and semen. Half-over, half-under him... a man she'd... met? No, never met, but somehow she knew this was *LaCroix*, the vampire master that *Nick* denied. But *this* was no denial!

No wonder he had rejected her!

Her visions blurred, and she wiped fingers across her cheeks. Tears? She cried for... herself. Perhaps for *Nick*, too. How she had come here — for it was real, no nightmare — she did not know, but it had not been by her own will. *Why* she had been brought, she didn't

dare contemplate. Suddenly frantic, she stood, wobbling, glancing down at herself. Her clothing was intact. She felt her neck, searching for a wound; there were none — No, wait! There! She'd been — they'd — Nick had — ? Or LaCroix?

Nicolas raised his head and stared at her. Nat turned away from his horrified look, sobbing. All was lost. She uttered a wordless cry and stumbled toward the door.

"Fleur!" He reached for her arms.

Sobbing, she pushed Nick away, revolted by his betraying nearness, the stink of him. "Get away from me!" she screamed. "I hate you! How could you do this? How *could* you? I never want to see you again!"

Before he could understand her words and prevent the act she must take, she ran past them and stumbled into the elevator, frantically fumbling with the controls.

The last sounds she heard were a harsh wail and a terrible, echoing laugh that followed her into the street and into her nightmares for the rest of her life. Though when she was awake, she couldn't remember anything beyond two simple words:

Forget....

Forever.

The End

Caught

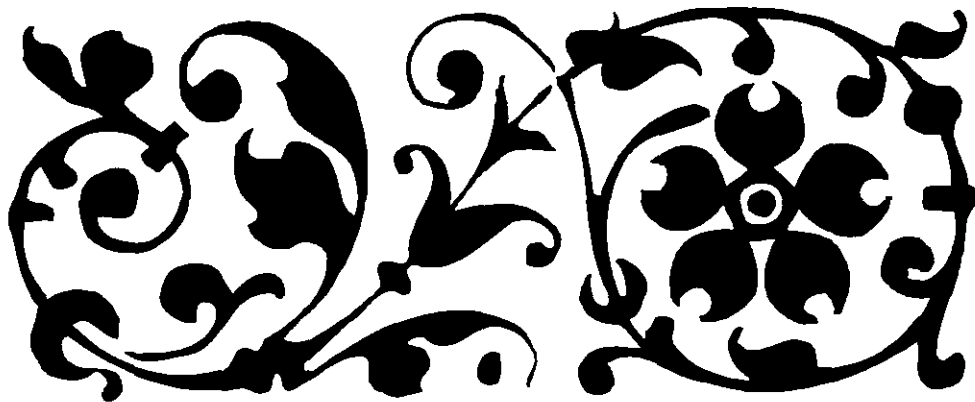
I tried to hate you,
to only see your evil.
Tried to leave you,
to be free
but still
I can't keep away from you

I listen
to you voice on the radio,
caressing me,
calling me,
capturing me
never to be free.

Damn you, LaCroix!

07 September 1996

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Lessons

by

- Leslie Grant Smith -

Lacroix looked up from his book as Nicholas wandered into the sitting room. His newest creation was silent, so Lacroix went back to his reading, conscious of course of his fledgling slouching around the room, poking and teasing the fire into a blaze, winning himself a mild singeing as a flare of sparks sprinkled his bare feet. Cursing, tossing the iron poker with a clatter on the hearth, Nicholas retreated, then threw himself into another of the great chairs, to slump there, hand on cheek, glowering at the flames. All in all, a charming performance, Lacroix mused, studying his protégé over the top of his book, the young man's golden hair tousled, his muscular form draped only in his white sleeping gown. Apparently Janette had banished him from their room rather precipitously, without allowing him to scoop up some clothing. Nicholas glanced over at him, and Lacroix met his eye with a raised brow and a bland smile.

"Women," the man spat out.

"And what leads you to this stirring indictment of the gentle sex, Nicholas?" queried Lacroix, closing his book as he leaned back in his chair, recrossing his legs and twitching his dark surcote straight over his knees. Of course he knew. His creation had no mental defenses against him, only a few weeks into his new life. This in addition to Janette's peeved annoyance bristling in his connection to her. But he wanted to hear Nicholas's reasons. Such as they were.

"Janette! Janette, of course. She is ... she is so ... demanding."

"Ah," Lacroix said lightly, brows lifting. "And you find yourself ... incapable of meeting her demands..?"

Nicholas naturally bridled at the suggested insult to his manhood, a manhood potent in mortality, which he had found delightfully enhanced by his new state of being. "Incapable?" he scoffed. "Of course I'm capable. The question is..." and he leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees to look earnestly into

Lacroix's eyes, "...the question is, do I *want* to meet her demands."

"And why would you not, Nicholas? Has the savor left your love already? This was to have lasted rather longer, you realize. Eternity, perhaps..."

The man leaned back in his chair again, rubbing his lips with the knuckles on one hand, his gaze sliding uneasily from Lacroix back to the fire. "No," he muttered against the back of his hand. "No, it has not. I burn for her, I become lost in her..." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, sliding one hand over his groin to conceal the stirring there. "I want ... I want to please her, Lacroix. But what she asks of me..."

"And what precisely does she ask of you that is so difficult to provide? I really can't imagine, Nicholas."

Nicholas glanced toward the door, perhaps trying to sense if Janette had left her room. Meeting Lacroix's eyes again with some difficulty, he lowered his voice. "She wishes me to use my mouth. On her ... on her woman parts." He made a vague gesture toward his own crotch with his hand. Amused by Nicholas's reticence, well acquainted with his more pungent vocabulary, Lacroix nevertheless kept his expression sober. Nicholas's love for Janette and the realization that she was under Lacroix's protection, his daughter basically, drew from him this more delicate word choice.

"And has she not used her mouth upon your," Lacroix mimicked Nicholas's gesture over his own groin, "man parts?"

Nicholas leaned back in his chair again, stretching out his legs, eyes returning to the fire, one hand cupped over his groin. The knuckles of the other again rested against his lips, this time partially concealing a small smile. He then glanced over at Lacroix, bringing his hand down to drape his forearm over the arm of the chair. "Yes," he replied, still smiling.

"And did that please you?" Lacroix asked unnecessarily, lips quirked at his progeny's unconsciously

self-satisfied pose.

"Of course," Nicholas replied softly, as his half-lidded eyes hazed with memory.

"Well, then," Lacroix went on briskly, "I fail to see the problem." Though, naturally, he did, being a student of the time and place, of all times, all places. But best to drag it out and nip his fledgling's little misunderstanding in the bud.

Nicholas's brows rose. "It's different, Lacroix. For a woman of the world like Janette, it means nothing for her to do these things."

"Do you call her a whore, Nicholas?" Lacroix demanded softly, eyes icy blue. He had taken her from that life, freed her from all constraints, except, naturally, his own will, and this young whelp of his had best not confuse that freedom with harlotry.

"No," Nicholas quickly avowed, glancing at Lacroix, concerned he may have offended him. He hurriedly clarified what he meant. "It's just different for a man. As you know. What is shameful, debasing for a man, isn't for a woman. If a man does these things, well, he becomes less than a man."

"It is debasing to give Janette pleasure," stated Lacroix flatly, attempting to slice the matter to bare bone, to show the man his folly.

"No, that's not what I mean, Lacroix," Nicholas protested, wondering why the man was being deliberately dense. His eyes left Lacroix's and roved over the wall, as though attempting to see beyond it to the room where he had left his passion. Or rather from which he'd been cast out. He murmured, voice deep, almost sultry, "I would please her. I ache to give her pleasure every day of our lives. But..." He turned back to Lacroix, eyes narrowed with annoyance. "As a man, Lacroix. I want to please her as a man should. As I *have* until now. Why does she seek to unman me?"

Lacroix sighed. This really was so tiresome. Not that he blamed his protégé for this particular attitude. He wondered if it was a remnant of his own people, who had brought civilization and order to this area a thousand years ago, give or take a century. Placing one's mouth on another's genitals, especially a woman's, degraded one utterly, to the Roman way of thinking. Even as a mortal, he had been quick to see these notions as specious, limiting, and toss them aside. And of course, Nicholas was dealing with this time's peculiar concept of sin and a woman's damning part in the "original" one, thereby painting all her gender with the taint of a dangerous carnality. Even this lusty knight, clearly a great lover of women, found something dangerous to his manhood in this simple, extremely

pleasurable act. But, regardless of the root of this prejudice, and whatever other similar limitations his Nicholas's upbringing had placed upon him, it would not do to let it stand. One couldn't allow conventions to come between oneself and one's desires. Especially those whom he had selected to join his ... family. And, to be sure, a little pedagogical venture into this subject could be quite diverting. He rose, dropping his book on the seat of his chair.

"Come up to my room, Nicholas. We have something that needs doing."

Hesitantly, Nicholas stood, stomach knotting a bit as he became aware that Lacroix, his master in this vampiric apprenticeship, had some kind of lesson in mind for him. And that those lessons pushed him to his limits, and then beyond them, smashing ideas he had about himself, about the world, often painfully. Not physically, usually, though he had broken Nicholas's arm the second day, to show him how quickly they healed. He had also had Nicholas break *his* arm, to show him how easily they could cause hurt. Both lessons had been ... uncomfortable. And strangely exhilarating, freeing. He searched Lacroix's face for some sign of his intentions, even groped mentally at their connection, attempting to discern his mood. But though Lacroix's lips curved upward when he perceived his progeny's use of his new powers, Nicholas could glean no hint of his designs. Lacroix turned away, and Nicholas followed him out of the room, to where Lacroix slept.

Janette's room, which he had shared with her since he had become a vampire, was full of beautiful things, fine fabrics that called to his hands to touch, to fondle. Lacroix's room seemed spare, at least in comparison, though the covers and canopy on the large four poster bed, the hangings on the wall, would not have been out of place in a king's chambers.

"Take off your shirt and get up on the bed, Nicholas," Lacroix said quietly, his back to the other as he took off his surcoat and hung it carefully on a peg in his wardrobe. He turned back to face Nicholas, who stood stiffly, unmoving, by the door. He raised his brows.

Nicholas looked at him, eyes narrowed with growing suspicion. "I don't want to do this, Lacroix."

"How do you know, Nicholas? What do you think is going to happen?"

The other's brows came down as he heated with anger and indignation, much more comfortable emotions to deal with than fear of impending humiliation. "You're going to try to fuck me," he

ground out. "To sodomize me. Some kind of lesson in debasement, no doubt."

"Nicholas, I do not *try*. I would either do it or not do it. And today ... I choose not to." He spread his arms, displaying his mid-calf length b্লাউ of heavy black silk. "I will remain dressed, as you see me. Now stop dawdling and get on the bed."

Lips tight, glaring at Lacroix, he stood stock still a moment longer. He did not find his pleasure with men. He didn't particularly care that others did, though he had a true man's contempt for those that made themselves as women, taking another man's cock in their mouth or ass. He didn't take Lacroix for one of those, knowing he bedded Janette, and seeing the great delight he took in the feminine charms of his ... meals. But Lacroix might... He *could* take him, he realized, easily overpower and rape him anytime he chose. And there was very little he could do to prevent it, though Lacroix would not leave such an attempt unscarred. He had lived with the fear of being sodomized whilst a captive in the Holy Lands, but had avoided that fate. He didn't like having that resurrected. But Lacroix said he wouldn't ... this time. What *was* he going to do, this time?

Lacroix's cold gaze had rested on him heavily as these thoughts quickly passed through his mind. Unwilling to display his uneasiness, Nicholas, narrow-eyed glare fixed on his maker, paced slowly over to the bed. At its edge, he stripped off his night shirt, casually dropping it in a heap on the floor of the well-ordered room. As he slid up onto the bed, his stomach clenched a bit, again wondering where Lacroix was taking this, his declaration that he didn't intend to ... bugger him removing this from his realm of experience. Nevertheless, he arranged himself into an easy, insouciant pose on Lacroix's bed, one hand behind his head on the pillow, the other hand resting on his belly, ankles crossed. He raised his brows, the insolent slant to his mouth daring Lacroix to show him something he didn't know.

Face impassive, inwardly delighted by his fledgling's challenging demeanor, Lacroix sauntered over to the bed and settled on the edge, his hands clasped and folded on his lap. He let his eyes roam over Nicholas's quite pleasing form, and while the man didn't actually move away from him, the sense of him shrinking back was palpable.

Lacroix picked up his protégé's more germane comment; his tone light, casual. "Though, as you guessed, this is a lesson in debasement. Or more precisely, in what it is and is not."

Nicholas closed his eyes at Lacroix's words, his tension growing. He found himself torn, both hoping the man would blather on all day and seething with impatience to get this all over with, to be on the other side of this experience and have it done. He listened with half an ear, waiting, waiting, for Lacroix to ... *do* whatever it was he was going to do.

"Debasement is a state of mind, Nicholas; an offense among one people is meaningless to another. Or 'natural,' even ideal. We must never make the mistake of accepting their mores as absolutes. Because, Nicholas, in the blink of an eye, that *will* change. These notions are as ephemeral as the mortals who hold them. There is only one thing which is constant.... Yourself. Your pleasures, your desires. You must never, ever, allow the small-mindedness of those around you deny you your ... gratification."

At the word 'gratification,' a cool breath tickled through the hairs at Nicholas's groin and his eyes flew open as Lacroix's mouth closed over his limp cock.

"Oh —" and then Nicholas's voice choked off, unable to utter any of a mortal's casual blasphemies.

Nicholas had loved this when Janette, when other women had done this, the slippery wetness, the skillful twirl of a tongue, the gentle sucking, had always driven him quickly mad with lust. The incredible shock of having of having a man — of having *Lacroix* — take him into his mouth couldn't diminish how ... good it felt. Or suppress the realization that his master's skill was considerable. Scandalously so. But surely giving him pleasure couldn't be his intent. What was he doing?

The recollection of the last, the only other time this man had placed his mouth upon him jolted through him. Every muscle in his body clenched as his once thickening cock withered. Was Lacroix going to bite him again, his fangs sinking into his penis the same way they had torn his throat? That searing, stunning pain... But the man remained unfailingly gentle, his teeth carefully hidden. Slowly, other memories came to him, of the sensations following the immediate pain of the bite. The jumble of images that flashed past too quickly to comprehend, mingled agony and darkly savored ecstasies. The mind-numbing bliss that had suffused his entire body as Lacroix had drawn him in, dissolving him into roiling chaos. Then the flaring lust for life that had surged through him, that lust carried to him on the flaming cold intoxication of Lacroix's blood. So that when Lacroix had wrenched his bleeding wrist away from his greedily sucking mouth, he had flung himself like a brute animal into Janette's willing arms;

burning, burning.

Lacroix closed his eyes as Nicholas, finally over his fright, bloomed in his mouth. The scent, the taste of Janette lingered on the young man's skin, in his curling pubic hair, and he sucked dreamily, savoring their mingled essences. The thickened head of the swelling phallus bumped against the back of his throat, and he pulled back, drawing hard on the stiffening staff, smiling around it at Nicholas's startled gasps. He shoved his tongue under the foreskin, the other crying out, shaking, fists clenched, as he exposed the tender glans. The skin, velvety soft under his lips, the shaft a welcome, weighty fullness on his tongue, drew a sigh from him, and he began working Nicholas's cock in earnest. The Greeks had held that a small phallus was the sign of a man of reason. Nicholas, to his delight, was evidently a man of great emotion and sensuousness. He growled with hunger, swallowing his son's long, heavy cock, while his own, marking him as a man with a bestial nature, swelled, snaking its way down the leg of his silk braies. He reached down, quickly adjusting himself through his tunic before he could become uncomfortably constrained. Nicholas's trembling hands came to rest upon his head, hesitant fingers moving through his bristling hair.

He brought his own hand up to rest lightly on Nicholas's testicles, as he shifted his whole body, kneeling between his protégé's eagerly spread legs. The man gripped his head more tightly, thrusting himself up into his mouth. Again Lacroix growled, wallowing in the impressions spilling through his link to his most recent creation. The whole-hearted surrender to sensation, to pleasure, his avid hunger for a mind-erasing ecstasy burned through their connection, and Lacroix increased his efforts, eager to encourage that need in his son.

Nicholas grunted with every upward thrust, as he popped again and again through the tight constriction of Lacroix's throat. The rippling convulsions as Lacroix swallowed his plunging length drove him into a frenzy; his fangs jutted down into his mouth, piercing his lower lip and he snarled at the taste of his own blood. His snarl became a rasping moan as Lacroix's lips, tongue and throat shoved him up to a peak of pleasure so sharp it was almost pain.

Lacroix wrenched his head away, out of the other's grasp. Nicholas's rigid, spit-wet shaft slapped down against his tension taut belly. The man cried out, climax forestalled, his hands flying to his bereft cock. He found his wrists seized in a grip of iron, and panting, whimpering, Nicholas opened his eyes, jerking

ineffectually against Lacroix's implacable hold. Vision blurred with lust, he peered up at the face inches away from his own.

"Am I debased, Nicholas, demeaned?" Lacroix whispered hoarsely, breath scented with sex. "Am I in any way less than I was before I took your prick in my mouth?"

Blinking, Nicholas attempted to clear his sight, his thoughts. Lacroix's grip on him, though not painful, proved unbreakable. The powerful ... pressure of the man's presence in his mind was unchanged, inescapable. Nothing ... had changed. He was still ... Lacroix, whatever that made him.

"No," he murmured, staring into the ice blue eyes, head rolling slightly from side to side in negation. Reason moved slowly in his lust-drenched brain, but he felt something shift. He had kissed this man's ring in homage, called him master. That *he* did this... Then his thoughts stumbled, his groin beginning to ache desperately, demanding release. His gaze flicked down to Lacroix's lips, slightly swollen and quirking up a bit at the corners. "Are you ... are you going to finish?"

Lacroix smiled, mouth bending into an ironic curve, and backed away down his body. He released Nicholas's wrists with a slight squeeze, and though his hands twitched up against his flanks, his protégé knew better than to make a grab at his cock. Kneeling back between Nicholas's legs, Lacroix ran his hands over his youngster's horseman-hard thighs, then said, "Roll over."

Nicholas inhaled sharply, a flare of fear spearing up his spine.

"You said..." he protested, his hands curling into fists.

"And what did I say, my Nicholas?"

"That — that you wouldn't — wouldn't sodomize me."

"No, not today. That's right. Roll over, Nicholas."

With that reassurance that was no reassurance, Nicholas rolled onto his stomach, his rigid cock pressed into the cool silk of Lacroix's bed covers.

"Up, Nicholas. Come up." Lacroix's hands were on his hips, pulling him onto his hands and knees. Eyes closed, guts a knot of tension, Nicholas obeyed numbly, not sure what Lacroix had in mind, only half trusting that he would keep his word. He waited in an agony of uncertainty as Lacroix shifted his position behind him. His hands clenched the thick silk spread as Lacroix casually stroked his buttocks before gripping his hips again.

He jerked forward at Lacroix's first touch in the

crease of his ass, only his master's grip on his hips keeping him from flinging himself onto his belly. Then he froze in astonishment. The thing nudging against his asshole wasn't Lacroix's cock or even his fingers. It was his tongue. It circled the tight ring of his sphincter, then slid slowly down to his balls to lave them luxuriously, drawing one, then the other, into a gently sucking mouth. He groaned as his testicles were released, and Lacroix licked back up to his anus, rubbing the tight opening with a flat, wet tongue.

"What ... what are you doing?" Nicholas moaned, the shock of Lacroix placing his *mouth* on *that* part of him nearly overwhelmed by the luscious sensations.

"Really, Nicholas, you have this odd trait of demanding one state the obvious," Lacroix murmured, his lips lightly brushing the tender flesh to the side of his progeny's well-clamped orifice. "I'm licking your ass." And he did just that, running his tongue up and down the crevice between Nicholas's round, hard cheeks, before bringing it and his lips back to the tightly furled bud at their center.

"Why?" Nicholas breathed, the shivering pleasure running across his buttocks and thighs and up his spine astounding.

"Does it feel good?"

"I d-don't..." Lacroix's tongue probed him more firmly, that rigid slickness pressing through the tight ring of his asshole. At the same time, the man's hand came up between his legs to lightly stroke the underside of his cock, to caress his balls. He leaned back against that mouth, that hand, melting into them as he groaned, "Ohhhhh, yesss..."

Lacroix continued his ministrations a moment, Nicholas's sighs a sweet music, his body's willing response to his touches inflaming his own groin with swelling desire. Then he removed his mouth from Nicholas, though he continued his light stroking of his rigid shaft and drawn up testicles. Straightening, he murmured, "That's why, mon cher protégé. It pleases you and amuses me. It's so, so simple."

Rocking his hips impatiently, Nicholas slid his demanding cock through the fingers cupping him with a growing irritation at Lacroix's incessant *talking*, when his mouth would be so much better put to use--The sharp, feral scent of his maker's blood suddenly filled his nose, and he whipped his head around to peer over his shoulder. Lacroix interrupted his perusal of the first two fingers of his right hand to smile at him languidly. Then he went back to watching the red oozing from his bitten fingertips, rolling his wrist so that the drops would not fall to his bed. Then, smiling

again into Nicholas's enthralled face, the young vampire's eyes glinting gold as he licked his lips at the scent of bloody seduction, he placed his fingers against his anus, slowly massaging that tight ring before slipping the first finger in.

Nicholas gasped, then snarled as the invading digit pressed deep into him. He began to pull away, then found Lacroix's grip on his penis quite effectively immobilized him. Unless he wished to emasculate himself, because he *knew* Lacroix was not going to let go. His muscles knotted as he prepared to endure the probing, clinging to Lacroix's word that he would go no further than this. A burning ache started in his sphincter as his tension constricted that ring of muscles. Gently, slowly, Lacroix's finger slid back and forth in him, slick with spit and blood. Somehow this was more infuriating than being stabbed at painfully. Because it felt ... good. Lacroix's other hand kept a firm grasp on him, still working him, keeping him stiff. The sweet fire building again at the root of his cock and Lacroix's persistent careful massage of his sphincter slowly eased the ache in his ass. A groan escaped him as Lacroix's second finger entered him, the stretching painful and pleasant at the same time. Then the fingers turned in him, Lacroix pressed, stroked at a specific point...

"Oh, fuck," Nicholas gasped, spasming helplessly with the nearly unbearable pleasure. His ass, his guts, bloomed with a heavy liquid fire and moaning deeply, all his resistance melted away.

"Nice, eh, my Nicholas?" Lacroix murmured. "See what you miss out on when you shun exploring all sensual possibilities?" The pressure of a thumb against the fingers was added from outside, rolling over that long neglected pleasure spot. Lacroix's hand stilled on Nicholas's cock as he held him balanced again on the brink of explosion. His protégé quivered under him, unbreathing, mind washed clean by incipient bliss. Then he eased his grip and Nicholas took a great sobbing breath, as his orgasm was denied him again.

"Fils d'une putain, Lacroix," he snarled, the Change heating his eyes, his brain, urging him to savage the one causing him such maddening frustration at the same time as it had him bucking backwards to impale himself on Lacroix's fingers. Lacroix responded by thrusting vigorously, taking care to stroke that sensitive gland, though lightly, lightly, so as not to bring the encounter to a precipitous conclusion. Nicholas's cock drooled liberally over his fingers as it plunged through them, the stickiness as the pinkish fluid dried threatening an over-stimulating friction.

Lacroix removed his hand, smiling at Nicholas's growled annoyance, enjoying his fervor, to spit into his palm. Nicholas groaned as Lacroix closed his fist around him again, pushing himself through that careful, slick grip.

Lacroix inhaled deeply, luxuriating in the scents of his protégé's arousal, with that hint of sandalwood, of his own blood. As he held Nicholas just at that point before a tumble into orgasm became inevitable, he allowed the moment to capture him, time congealing around him. Candlelight honeyed the sleek skin of Nicholas's back, taut columns framing the shadowed length of his spine leading up to the knotted muscles of his shoulders and upper back. It glinted off a lengthened fang, was mirrored in an amber gleaming eye, creating a mask of ecstatic agony as Nicholas tossed his head, snarling. The brute potency of the rigid shaft he gripped in his fist contrasted exhilaratingly with the melting surrender of the flesh around his thrusting fingers. His own groin burned, his erection a fierce ache, the silk of his undergarment a chafing torment. The newly forged link to his creation shivered as Nicholas teetered on the brink, and with a harsh gasp, Lacroix pulled back, shattering the spell. He released Nicholas's penis to grasp his hip, shoving his fingers deeply into his ass, then leaving them motionless. Nicholas writhed under him, seeking his touch, close, so close to the completion Lacroix denied him.

"No. No, no," the man rasped, though he didn't move to grab himself. "More. More now." He shoved back, urging him on. Lacroix moved with him, providing no stimulation.

"More? More what, Nicholas?" Lacroix murmured, carefully pressing his fingers deeper into his protégé's ass. Grunting, Nicholas leaned back, attempting to impale himself further, craving the pressure, to be filled and finally propelled over the edge. Lacroix eased away from him.

"Ah, fuck you, Lacroix," Nicholas spat, clenching his sphincter tight on the other's fingers, rocking his hips, searching for that touch to his ass or his cock that would bring him relief. "Give it to me," he ground out, demanding his climax. There was a moment's pause, both men utterly still. Then Nicholas turned his head to stare at Lacroix with burning eyes, a slanting, crafty grin curving his lips.

"Yesss, Lacroix, give it to me," he whispered, voice deep, rough with lust. He undulated his hips slowly. "Fuck me. I know you want to. I can feel it."

Lacroix's eyes widened. "Do you hear what you're saying, Nicholas?" he breathed. "You're asking another

man to fuck you, to take you in the ass."

Nicholas blinked, confusion muddying the clarity of his desires. Then Lacroix's fingers moved inside him, pressing up against that secret spot. He sighed, trembling once more on the verge before Lacroix drew back again. His urges regained their razor keenness.

"Just ... just do it, Lacroix," he whispered, through clenched teeth, squeezing his eyes shut tight. "I ... need. I need."

"That's right. Your needs, Nicholas. Your ... desires. They are all that matter. The foolish notions that rule mortals do not apply to us."

His protégé cried out as he slipped his fingers from him, then froze as he leaned over him, his groin tight against Nicholas's buttocks. The supple silk of his tunic did nothing to conceal the iron hardness of the long shaft pressing along the crevice of his ass. Lacroix continued, murmuring into his ear, "Yes, I shall fuck you. And you ... you, Nicholas, will fuck me." He paused, smiling at the sensations roiling through their bond. "But..." Lacroix pushed himself away, patting Nicholas's flank. "But not today." He got off the bed, jerking his tunic straight. Nicholas reared back to sit on his heels, mind reeling, staring at the tall, slender figure in black. Lacroix looked up, meeting his gaze mildly.

"What is it, mon fils?"

"Wh- I don't... I will fuck you..?" He cupped his hands over his crotch, trying to soothe it as his thoughts whirled, again remembering himself kissing his master's ring, paying homage. Unsettled, exhilarated, he found himself growling, "And why not today? Now?"

Lacroix reached out to lightly stroke his progeny's cheek. "Did you enjoy that, Nicholas?"

"Yes," he hissed, his eyes glinting as he resisted the impulse to snatch that hand from his face, use it to drag the man back onto the bed. "Yes. It felt ... good." His fingers began roving lightly up and down his cock.

"Why would I deny myself that pleasure? Hm? Because the ephemeral mayflies we live among say I am demeaned by the act? Meaningless, Nicholas. These mortal conventions are meaningless, and I will not allow them to stand in the way of wringing every drop of pleasure I can from my existence. I am no more diminished by taking your prick in my ass than I am by taking it in my mouth." He smiled with a certain smugness at Nicholas's tiny intake of breath, his hands tightening on himself, that memory suddenly sharp in him. He was also pleased to see some of the bewilderment clear from his progeny's expression as his words began to sink in. Lacroix turned, still smiling,

to walk to the door.

"Wait! And why not today?"

Lacroix looked over his shoulder, hand on the latch. "Because, Nicholas, I said not today. Remember? Besides, you have other business to attend to."

"Business..?"

Lacroix opened the door to reveal Janette, large eyes sparkling, highly intrigued by her maker's call. She glanced at Lacroix, gave him a slight nod and a tiny smile of shared mischief, then swept regally into the room. With difficulty, she restrained her giggles at the sight of Nicholas, kneeling on the bed, both hands gripping his penis, his mouth rather foolishly agape.

"Janette. I...uh, we — It's not..." He shut up. She looked the queen, her head high, in a robe of white samite glinting with gold threads. He took his hands from himself, though he supposed he appeared no less a cretin with the monster that refused to die bobbing exposed before him.

"Really, Nicholas," Lacroix interjected, coming up to stand behind and to one side of her, his dark severity off-setting her flowing elegance. "Janette was quite aware of what we were doing."

"Indeed, Lacroix. Our ... connection was quite ... agitated," Janette murmured, her gaze on her lover. She flicked a quick glance at her maker. "And did you enjoy yourself?"

"Naturally." He bent to place a light kiss in the curve of her neck and shoulder.

"And it seems Nicolas did as well."

Lacroix glanced slyly at his rampant son. Then he circled Janette's shoulders with his arms, his fingers going to the tie at the collar of her robe. He loosed it, then undid the three below it. Nicholas watched, eyes widening.

"And now, ma cherie," Lacroix said quietly, "your lover has been exceedingly gauche and wishes to make it up to you." He took her robe where it opened at her throat and slowly drew it back. The silk slipped off her shoulders, then she was nude, the candlelight warming her pale skin. Nicholas's blue eyes turned black as his pupils dilated, drinking her in. Lacroix stepped back, his smug smile accompanied by a lazy blink, enjoying the burning interplay between his creations.

Janette's chin lifted, more secure in the pride of her beauty, captured forever by Lacroix's gift, than any princess in the finest, heaviest brocades. Nicholas's eyes roamed over her, caressing her, and she was well aware of her maker's lingering gaze. She wondered a moment why she hadn't taken them both together yet, then saw Nicholas's hand stray absently to his hard,

arching shaft and remembered she simply hadn't had the time.

Nicholas's avid eyes took in her high, round breasts, the arrogant thrust of their nipples, her narrow waist, the womanly flare of her hips, then stopped at the dark, silky triangle between her legs. His nostrils flared as the tip of his tongue slid out to touch his upper lip.

"Pull back the covers, mon fils," Lacroix murmured. "The spread has taken enough abuse." Nicholas started from his spell and eagerly lunged forward to drag the covers back, exposing the soft, white linen sheets. He looked back up at Janette, meeting her eyes, a tentative smile curving his lips. He gestured toward the open bed, managing a small but graceful bow from his knees. Janette stepped away from Lacroix, gliding to the bed, wide eyes locked on her Nicolas. She slid up onto the sheets, reclining with feline ease on her side, then, smiling now, became still, waiting for Nicholas's next move. Lacroix strolled over to the foot of his bed, tossed her garment across its foot, then leaned nonchalantly against the oak post supporting the canopy. Nicholas glanced up at him.

"Do you mind, Lacroix?" He looked pointedly at the door.

"Not at all, Nicholas," the other replied, ignoring the look. He spread his hands, made small pushing motions. "Carry on."

Nicholas glanced over at Janette and from her impish expression realized he had no ally there. He sighed. Considering what he had just done, what he was about to do, the presence of a third party was inconsequential. He had been having sex with others sleeping — or not — around him since his teens. But they had never been there to check his work. He shrugged mentally and did his best to put Lacroix from his mind by focusing on Janette.

He hesitated a moment, uncertain of where to start. Janette stretched back on the pillows with a smoldering smile, and his erection, which had flagged somewhat, sprang to fullness again. He moaned slightly, his resurgent cock, rigidly stiff, beginning to ache for a desperately desired release. Impulsively, he bent and set a kiss on her high-arched foot. She hummed, wriggling her toes, and he kissed them as well. She shivered and he realized that she was quite aroused herself, that she had been feeling the excitement through her bonds to Lacroix and to himself. He shifted himself to lie at her feet, and then with a sultry smile up the length of her body, he closed his lips around her big toe.

Lacroix smiled at the sound of his daughter's soft

sigh, and watched with some interest as Nicholas slowly worked his way up her legs, kissing, licking, nibbling, before at last he reached the insides of her thighs. He didn't rush his task either, taking his time to savor Janette's sleek skin, the teasing aroma of her growing passion, her throaty moans and sighs. A note-worthy — and gratifying — restraint, given his progeny's ravenous craving to finally slake his lust, so stimulatingly evident in their bond. Nicholas's ... apology to Janette would be quite complete.

Lacroix's gaze lingered over the hard, round buttocks set so temptingly before him, and he contemplated taking Nicholas now, as Nicholas took Janette. Or one of them might take her from before while the other pleased her from behind. Both notions had definite appeal. He stroked his neglected phallus lightly through his tunic, then, smiling, dropped his hand. No sense in rushing this, in denying himself the joy of days, weeks, perhaps months, of mental and physical stimulation, of ... foreplay, as it were, before the final consummation. Besides, for this little ... lesson to be truly effective, his Nicholas, this intriguing new creation of his, should be the one to bring about that final step. To come to desire, away from the heat of passion, on clear reflection of what he'd just experienced, those pleasures of which he'd just had his first incomplete, tantalizing taste. To desire *him*, his initiator, and what he could do. It was far, far better to wait, relishing until then that state of arousal which brought savor, vitality, to his existence.

Nicholas nuzzled the curling fuzz before him, Janette's aching desire a tingling heat in his own mind, stronger than he had ever felt before. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the realization that the increased strength of their connection was because of their master's nearness. His primary thoughts, what little there was of them, concerned his own stupidity in denying her, in denying himself, this pleasure. He'd always adored the scent of a woman. How much more pleasing would be her taste, and the feeling of all those tender, convoluted parts against his sensitive tongue? He was who he was. How could this act, one that gave only pleasure, make him any less? He struggled against his impulse to make a mad dash for his goal, that release to be gained between Janette's thighs, determined to please her, to bring her to as near a state of desire as his own. To that same near-frenzy Lacroix had brought him...

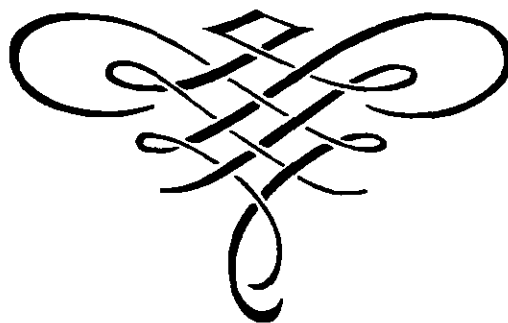
With that thought, he became very aware of his maker's presence, looming behind him, his eyes upon him. A tingling ran up his spine, over the skin of his

buttocks and thighs; the sensation of the man's tongue on him, his fingers in him, still burning along his nerves. More. He wanted more. Left unsatisfied, he wanted those fingers back, touching him in that place deep inside. Or ... more. To be filled... That rigid shaft, half hidden in the silk, pressed against him ... in him. His cock, squeezed between his belly and the bed, throbbed once with the thunderous beat of his heart, and he moaned with the pleasure/pain of it. He plunged his tongue between the lips of Janette's inner core, wishing it was his cock thrusting into her. Or Lacroix...

Lacroix watched as Janette, moaning, lifted her hips, pushing herself against Nicholas's mouth. Her fingers tangled in the dark gold hair, as Nicholas finally, finally, went at it in earnest. Fairly quickly, the impassioned strain smoothed from his daughter's face to be replaced by mindless rapture. She wailed as her bliss soared, and both Nicholas and Lacroix shuddered as it crashed through their bond once, and then again.

Lacroix left the room as Nicholas slid up her body to kiss her mouth with lips wet with her own fluids. He made his way through their rooms, tucked in the center of the manor, away from all windows, to the door of an inner atrium. He stepped through it into the small rose garden, taking a deep breath of the clear twilight air, fresh with dew and the blooming flowers. He paused a moment, both internal and external senses alive. His lips parted slightly, as he inhaled slowly, lids sliding down to hood his eyes. He grunted softly as Nicholas's shattering orgasm surged through their link, closing his eyes through the rumbling after shocks. Then grinning toothily to himself, luxuriating in his own unrelieved lust, his tantalized anticipation, he launched himself into the sky. A good kill and all would be very, very right in his world.

Fin



Chance Encounters

by
tasha

(Author's note: This story is set after "Last Knight" in the Forever Knight series and after "Judgment Day" and "One Minute to Midnight" in the Highlander universe. This is an alternate universe story for both series and in Highlander ignores all episodes following the ones listed above.)



Spring 1996
British Columbia

The softly lapping waves sang a quiet restful song, as Nick Knight strolled the shoreline. The tall pine trees came nearly to the water's edge, giving this coastline a unique appeal to him. He enjoyed walking in both forests and along seashores. This area gave him both in one package. He stood among the gently lapping wavelets

and drew from his coat pocket a slim leather folder. Opening it, he studied the photograph and the other pertinent information of his previous life as Nick Knight, homicide detective, of Toronto. He considered flinging the offending object as far as his strong right arm could send it. Rejecting this idea, he smiled as he remembered an old tv show in which the two cops hurled their badges into the ocean. Nick closed the folder and slid it into the breast pocket of his jacket. The shoulder holster no longer rested beneath his left arm, and he felt somehow naked. There was time to put one on tomorrow. Right now, he was enjoying the freedom of being a civilian.

After the shambles he left in Toronto, this peaceful place had begun to heal his troubled soul, if he had one. Natalie was *dead* and LaCroix had refused to stake him, saying that if he wanted to commit suicide, he could do it without his ancient master's help.

"Damn you, Nicolas!" still rang in his head. He could visualize Natalie slumped lifelessly on the floor beside him. He waited and waited for the stake to fall — death by his master's hand. It was appropriate that the one who had wrought his change should end it.

"If you want to kill yourself, do it without me!" LaCroix had snarled, throwing the stake at the fireplace. "Walk in the sun tomorrow morning. Never ask me again to be a party to your perversions!" LaCroix had then lifted Natalie's lifeless body in his arms and started out the door. "Don't think I'm doing this for your peace of mind. I'm doing it for The Community. The Community doesn't need any more problems from this family." With that parting

comment, he had stalked from the loft. Nick had spoken to him only once after that, then LaCroix severed any ties he had with his recalcitrant child. Their bond of blood was silent and barricaded against any invasion by him. There had been a time when this barricade would have been welcome. Now he would have welcomed any solace — even LaCroix's.

By the time the sun rose the next morning, Nick remembered a vow. Not fulfilling vows was something he couldn't live with or die with. So he made the effort to live and try to redeem himself. He hoped Natalie would understand why he couldn't follow her.

Consequently, he had returned to the precinct to face the shooting team and Internal Affairs. It had been determined to be a righteous shooting. In many ways, he hadn't agreed with the Internal Affairs investigation. He should have known that she was standing behind him. It was his job to cover for his partner, and he had failed. Then he had failed again — failed Natalie as well as failing Tracy.

The only duties left to him had been to attend two funerals which he sadly did. He stood in the freezing drizzle on a gloomy, icy Wednesday night and watched Natalie's coffin lowered into the moist earth. LaCroix had covered her death in a fiery accident with a gasoline tanker, when ostensibly she had been on her way to Nick's place to inform him of Tracy's death. The next day had dawned with even more drizzle turning to snow and near darkness allowing him to attend the funeral of his partner, the naive blonde detective, Tracy Vetter.

He'd asked for and received a transfer to Vancouver with a few day's leave to make the transition. He remembered Reese's deep, gravelly voice breaking with sympathy when he had turned in his request. Everyone had understood his need to move on after losing two partners in less than nine months and Natalie. He'd taken the first opening in the Vancouver department. He hadn't wanted to take another homicide assignment, and luckily, the next available position had been with the vice squad.

Nick had wanted to get away, but didn't really want to leave this human identity completely behind. He had thought he had been doing some good as a police officer. After his near death experience the previous year, he knew that to achieve some sort of salvation, he needed to atone in some manner for his past sins. Perhaps that was the key to his unending

pursuit of mortality. His Medieval human upbringing had firmly agreed with this assessment. But he couldn't live with the memories that dwelled in Toronto. He was running away again. Nick knew that, but it had been a conscious decision to leave that life behind. He couldn't face the squad room without Tracy or Schanke or the Coroner's building without Nat. So he simply had to get away.

In disgust, LaCroix had left as he had warned. For the first time, his master had voluntarily loosed the tethers that bound them to each other. Nick worried the unfamiliar barrier in his mind like a sore tooth. For the first time in their relationship, he couldn't reach LaCroix; he had tried. And he knew the difference from not being able to reach him and being ignored. He wasn't being ignored. He literally couldn't ask for help, and LaCroix probably wouldn't come if he did. Nick had never seen his mentor/master quite so displeased with him — even when he'd tried to kill him a few years ago.

Rather forcefully, LaCroix had told him to do what he liked, but not to expect him to rush to his rescue when he got in too deep. Strangely, before he left, LaCroix had been present at the funerals of the two women in Nick's life. He had hovered at the edge of the cemeteries, not to intrude upon the grief of the families, or perhaps he didn't want to brave the sanctified ground. He had nodded gravely to Nick as the mourners gathered in tight quiet groups or slowly walked to their cars. Nick hadn't heard or seen him since. It had been a relief in some ways, but in others, he felt more alone than he ever had during all his 800 years. Often he felt as if were drifting above a deep abyss.

He had left Toronto which was still suffering from a freezing winter to find that spring had arrived in British Columbia with full force. The roses and other flowers in Victoria had seemed to come out of a fairy tale. He had spent a couple of nights touring the city with its quaint European flavor before deciding that he really wanted to leave humanity behind for a while. The island that he'd rented in the sheltered lea of Vancouver Island had suited him well. He wouldn't be averse to spending more time there. Nick thought he might see about purchasing the whole island, under an assumed name, of course.

He had only one more day before he had to face another new squad room. It had been easy enough to transfer with Schanke from the 27th to the 96th. This

time he'd have to address, in some way, all the unasked questions and endure the looks of sympathy or suspicion on the faces by himself. They'd all know his history in Toronto. He knew that they wouldn't ask questions directly, but the questions would be there all the same. *How had he managed to get two partners killed? What kind of a Police Officer was he? Was he going to break down when the going got tough? Was he burned out?* The last two were the hardest questions for him to answer to his own satisfaction. Would he be able to stand the stress of the investigations or *was* he burned out? He wasn't immune to stress or burn-out, he didn't think. He just processed it differently than humans.

Then he wondered if he could find a human confidant who might be willing to continue his search for mortality, but more realistically did he want to confide in another mortal? Was his passion for this longtime quest waning without the encouragement and support of Natalie? He didn't know. Nick did know it wasn't a passing fancy, but perhaps he was simply weary of trying and failing. He'd had so many setbacks in the past year, not the least of which was Janette's success and ultimate failure. Eventually he decided to put the whole project on hold while he settled into the new environment of both the job and his solitary lifestyle. Deep down he knew it was simply an excuse.

He was drinking human blood again. It was outdated blood from blood banks and hospitals, but human just the same. Feliks had contacts all over Canada and the US for blood, so he took advantage of them.

Suddenly uneasy with this retrospective, he soared over the narrow ocean passage to the small heavily wooded island that he had rented during his leave. Tomorrow he would go back to Campbell River on Vancouver Island. He'd then drive down the coast and eventually make his way to the city of Vancouver. The huge old Caddy had been left in storage in Toronto — again something with so many recent and uneasy memories of Tracy, Schanke, and Natalie that he couldn't drive the car without one of them invading his mind. There had been times over the last few months that he could almost smell the garlic over Tracy's expensive perfume. And Schanke's ghost had been bad enough to deal with. He didn't need two more ghosts hovering over him.

He had a place purchased and ready; it was nothing like the loft he had left behind. This time he'd gotten a

house with a lovely basement for his daytime refuge; no need for the elaborate shutter system of the loft and more in keeping with *what* he was, he decided morbidly.

Larry Merlin had overseen the move and the necessary computer fiddling so he could legally buy a house, and the other mundane details were smoothed over in his competent hands. Aristotle had recently moved to the area and had assisted with the final details, commenting that this was an easy relocation as opposed to some he had to do recently. He might have been making an oblique reference to LaCroix or the general exodus of the Toronto vampire community, but Nick hadn't been interested enough to ask.



Staring at the paint flaking off the walls in a sleazy hotel room, Nick Knight thought that the headphones over his ears were wearing grooves in his skull. Recently, he had been spending all his nights in this tiny room with mildewed walls listening to inane conversations from across the street. He had shared this room for many long nights with his new partner. The daylight hours were covered by another squad.

A light tapping drew his attention from the mind-numbing nothing coming through the headphones. As the door swung open, his hand slid under his jacket for his gun. It stopped as he recognized his partner. Stan Whitman had been a second-string linebacker for the BC Lions out of college. He fit the stereotypical image of an ex-football player. His bullnecked torso was just starting to run to fat. When he was tired, he moved with a slight limp from an old football injury, but still had some of the speed and agility required of a linebacker. The man lived in blue jeans and torn t-shirts or sweat shirts. He was inches taller and heavier than Nick. It made an interesting contrast between them. Nick had never thought of himself as skinny or a fashion model, but around Stan, he seemed to be both. In fact, Janette had often told him his fashion sense stank. In spite of his resolve to avoid intimate human relationships, he was becoming fond of the larger man.

Rubbing his hands through his bristly, thinning, mouse-brown hair after putting the paper bag he had been carrying on the chipped nightstand, Stan said, "It's raining again." Stan rattled the bag as he took out steaming cups of coffee. "Sure you don't want a burger or something?" he asked, handing Nick the coffee.

"Black, right?" Nick nodded.

"Coffee's fine," Nick said, watching Stan delve through the grease stained sack.

Like Schanke in the past, Stan made the occasional comment about Nick's eating habits or lack thereof. Nick had taken to accepting coffee and seeming to sip on it before dumping it in the nearby bathroom commode. It made the stakeout easier. At least they weren't sitting in a car for hours on end, Nick thought, while trying to concentrate on the sound coming through the headphones.

"Anything?" Stan questioned and then settled down on the sagging bed to eat his burgers and fries after Nick's shake of his head. The tape machine sitting on the table by the window had recorded maybe five minutes of worthwhile conversation all night. It was maddening. He was tired of hearing about favorite hookers which seemed to be their suspects' only topics of conversation.

It should have been an easy drug bust. There had been a phone call from the Colorado Bureau of Investigation regarding a known drug smuggler and dealer who had fled from Denver to Vancouver before a warrant could be issued to tap his phone. The Colorado Narcotics officer said that there hadn't been enough evidence to grant the warrant at that time in his jurisdiction. He had been pretty disgusted with the judge, and the fact that this guy had gotten out of his clutches.

Working with the RCMP, the Vancouver vice squad had gotten a Queen's Writ for the wire tap. Nick and Stan had been the night squad assigned to liaison with the RCMP. So far the wire tap had been a bust.

Interrupting his reflections, the tapes on the machine began spinning and the earphones came alive in Nick's ears. He began jotting notes out of habit, not caring that the tape recorder was taking everything down verbatim. Stan was leaning over his shoulder as he wrote down the address.

Pulling the headphones loose, he said, "Something's going down tonight." Stan nodded and grabbed his radio and called in the few details to the station. Nick barely listened as he checked his weapon. Then Stan was doing the same after he threw what was left of his interrupted meal in the trash.

They ran down the steps to Nick's car while struggling into the required flak vests. Nick had invested in an old Mercedes diesel. It had a huge trunk,

but not the dash of the Caddy he'd left in Toronto. Stan lunged into the passenger seat as Nick started the engine. The diesel rattled alarmingly, but neither noticed. It was normal for diesel engines to sound as if they were going to throw a rod at any moment. Nick knew the motor was in tiptop shape. He'd paid a lot of money to have the best Mercedes engine available put in the aging car. He couldn't afford a new Mercedes on a cop's salary, but a battered used one didn't set off any alarms with Internal Affairs either in Toronto or Vancouver any more than the old Caddy had.

The Merc didn't have the immediate pick-up of the Caddy, but once launched it ran well. Careening through the quiet, damp streets that gleamed in the dim moonlight and reflected off the street lamps, they made their plans. Nick was heading for the warehouse district near the docks. Like all port cities, the wharf and warehouse districts overran each other in Vancouver.

In an alley a few blocks from the appointed address, the two sat and fidgeted in the Merc waiting impatiently for the rest of the crew to arrive. They didn't have to wait long. In just a couple of minutes, two patrol cars stopped quietly beside them, then an RCMP four-wheel drive arrived from the other direction. Nick and Stan got out of the Merc and walked over to the RCMP vehicle. The Inspector was shutting his door then turned to look at them.

The other officers began assembling, all wearing the dark flak vests with either Police or RCMP stamped in large, white letters on the back. Heavy pump shotguns were the weapons of choice for most of them.

"Knight, you and your partner take the back way. Leason and Higgs will take the front with Martin and Jefferies as back-up," Inspector Hobbs said briskly, leading the team down the alley toward the warehouse. Somewhat disappointed to be relegated to a minor role, both Nick and Stan voiced the affirmative and followed the group as they stalked down the damp alley. Nick assumed that even after all the time he'd been on the Force here, he wasn't completely trusted not to blow it when the going got tough. He knew his Captain occasionally questioned Stan on Nick's state of mind. Pushing away the uncomfortable thoughts, he hurried to catch up with Stan.

Nick nodded to Stan who was waiting at the end of the alley, and they separated from the group to move into an adjoining street then another alley. Slinking next to walls and going from doorway to doorway, the two officers carefully made their way to the back doors

of the quiet warehouse with their handguns free of their holsters.

Testing the door, Nick nodded again to Stan. They waited to hear the break-in from the front of the building. As the crash came faintly to Nick's ears, he yanked the door nearly off its hinges and slid through moving to the right with Stan crouching and covering him. When there was no reaction to the noise they made, Nick waved Stan through the opening, watching for any movement. He knew Stan would take the left side of the hallway.

Advancing cautiously down the darkened hall, they had to stop and check each and every room or door. It was slow but they didn't need one of the dealers coming up behind them. This whole area of the warehouse was a warren of abandoned offices and storerooms. Their meticulous search was cut short as shots rang out just ahead of them. Dropping into an alert dash, they ran toward the closed door at the end of the hallway. Not wanting to be taken down by friendly fire, they shouted, "Police!" and kicked the door open while falling to opposite sides of the door and away from it.

Nick leaned cautiously around the doorjamb to find that there was a large open area with boxes and refuse stacked or leaning precariously around the walls. The bodies of two drug dealers lay on the floor along with a bleeding, but conscious and moving, Inspector Hobbs. Leason and Higgs had three more perps assuming the position against some heavy wooden boxes along the wall to the right. Martin was slowly circling the area in one direction while Jefferies was going the other way, shining flashlights up and around the huge room, behind boxes and up to the catwalk running overhead.

Rushing forward, Nick helped Inspector Hobbs to his feet. Reaching into his pocket, Nick brought out his radio and called for an ambulance and the coroner. He felt a twinge of pain as he realized that the coroner coming on this call wasn't Natalie and *would never be* Natalie. He closed off that part of his mind and began covering the crime scene with the other officers after Hobbs had waved him away in irritation. Leason and Higgs had taken the surviving dealers out to the squad cars while Martin had come back and insisted on administering first aid to Inspector Hobbs with better luck than Nick had had at convincing the Inspector to let someone help him.

The crime scene was becoming hectic as

ambulances and the forensic squad arrived with all the other attendant groups of photographers, artists and fingerprint experts. The babble of voices began to get on Nick's nerves as he saw Inspector Hobbs off in the ambulance.

As Nick came back into the warehouse, he heard Stan yelling.

"Jeezus Chrrrist!" Stan shouted from behind a tall mound of refuse. Nick hurried over followed by Martin and Higgs. Well hidden behind the pile of trash, Stan was ripping open heavy wooden boxes. A couple of them were easily identifiable as ammunition boxes and some of them had the long lean look of rifle boxes. All of the officers were stunned to find the cache of weapons. There were hand grenades, rifles, automatic weapons, and hand guns. There was one metal box which had the markings of the US Army and revealed small anti-aircraft rockets.

"These guys were trying for the big time," Stan commented as he pried open a box to reveal the anti-personnel mines. "Jesus Christ!" he repeated softly as if afraid that a loud noise would set off the innocuous metal canisters while he gently put the lid back. All the police officers stepped back and allowed the RCMP to see what the fuss was about.



Samuel T. Windermuller, captain of detectives at the precinct, arrived just as the ambulance left the parking lot. He stalked into the crime scene, his bulk overshadowing most of the technicians slowly gathering evidence. He quickly began getting reports from all the officers and took a few moments to study the stacked weapons.

"Definitely your baby," he said to the RCMP officers surrounding the area.

He saw his two detectives standing to the side of the room. Walking over to them, he studied the two men.

"Knight, you go back to the station, make your report and book off for a few days. Our part of this case is about wound up. This armory is the RCMP's responsibility."

"I don't really need any time off, Captain," Nick protested.

"Knight, you look like hell. You haven't taken any time off since you transferred." Pulling Nick aside, he

put his hand on Nick's shoulder, and said earnestly, "Nick, I'm worried about you."

Suddenly Nick realized that the Captain was genuinely concerned and not being judgmental at all. He was probably wondering if some day Nick might just take his gun and blow his brains out. He knew he hadn't made any friends in Vancouver and had avoided most social contacts. He'd resisted all the overtures of his partner and the other members of his squad. Stan was one of the few who called him Nick after all this time on the job. Yes, he could see where the Captain was coming from.

"All right, Cap. I'll try to catch up my paperwork on this and some back cases before I leave."

"Leave the other stuff for Whitman." The Captain smiled, knowing that Stan was standing beside him cringing. "Just take some time — walk on the beach, go fishing — something."

"Okay," Nick smiled faintly, wondering what he was going to do with this unscheduled vacation.

"Stan, you stay here and help us wind up this drug bust. Someone'll give you a ride back to the precinct."

Whitman nodded in agreement then said to Nick, "You're a lucky sod, getting out of all that paperwork we've been putting off."

"Yeah," Nick agreed and gave the glum Stan an affectionate pat on the shoulder as he walked away.

Grimacing at Nick, Stan turned back to his superior. Nick grinned at his partner's discomfort. Stan hated paperwork more than Nick.

Nick took a shorter route back to his car. When he reached the dull brown Mercedes, his keen ears picked up an unusual and ancient sound. It was not a sound normally found in a city any longer, but he immediately identified it even though he hadn't heard it for nearly a century. But his conscious mind knew without thinking what it was. *It was the clash of swords.* Without further thinking, he began moving rapidly toward the sound. He raced down the alley and between two warehouses to an empty lot that was lit by two mercury vapor lights. Two men were sparring with gleaming blades, but from the intent look on their faces it was a serious match. One was tall and lean, the other was heavier with thick biceps. The clash of the swords rang overloud in the misty night.

As the lean figure moved out of the shadows, his face was limned by the bright lamp overhead. There was something hauntingly familiar about the stance and

face of the man. Nick *knew* that angular face with the patrician nose. He might not have seen the visage in nearly four hundred years, but his almost perfect vampiric memory asserted itself with memories that had been long suppressed.



Spain — Nick

Leaning his head against the rough wood, Nicolas tried to distance his mind from the present moment. He had always been plagued with memories that could be raw and painful or could possibly be pleasant and enjoyable but usually demanded his attention at the most inappropriate times. Now when he needed to slip off to the past either joyful or wretched, he couldn't.

His hands were on fire. The need to clench his fists or pull away was immense, but impossible. He could hear movement behind him and his muscles tightened involuntarily at the next bout of pain that might be dealt him. He would give almost anything to hear the mocking voice of his master as once more LaCroix removed him from another of his foolish problems. However, that wasn't possible as he was miles from the comfortable estate in which his master was ensconced at the moment.

"It isn't dead yet?" questioned a voice from behind Nicolas, startling him momentarily. It took a while for him to remember this gentle voice so at odds with the activities of the body that housed it. The owner of this voice rarely did any of the dirty work, but he was the instigator.

"No, this one must be the devil himself," answered the grating voice of Nicolas' actual tormentor. He would never forget the hoarse voice that taunted him as the owner applied the hot irons, whips or other more grotesque devices.

"Interesting," the softer voice answered, studying the tattered, tormented figure. "I will return to my rooms and pray for this man, Rodrigo. Oh, and Rodrigo, don't forget that tomorrow is Sunday." Rodrigo nodded and knelt for blessing in front of the priest who rested his hands on the dirty, tangled mane. Rodrigo crossed himself as the quiet words were whispered. Then the priest turned his attention from his henchman and back to Nicolas.

Rodrigo rose and took his tools back to be hung on the wall. He scanned the back wall for more

appropriate devices for his next session.

The tall, slender man in the black robe returned to the figure on the cross. The outstretched arms were nailed to the rough wood in a parody of the good Christ himself. The priest again gently, but firmly pulled Nicolas' head around and confronted the glowing yellow eyes.

"My son, you will soon attain a state of grace and your soul will be released into the keeping of our Lord."

Amongst all the pain, Nicolas distractedly heard the priest leave the room. The door clanged dully as it closed behind the holy man. Nicolas quivered as he again heard Rodrigo moving items out of his field of vision. He had endured hot irons pressed to his vulnerable flesh and steel tipped whips which tore chunks of muscle from his bones. These wounds were slow to heal, even with his metabolism. And as always, The Hunger tore at him. He was too weak to break free and feed upon his torturer so his trial of the flesh continued. It was a cruel unending circle of pain, then The Hunger, then pain again.

A quick glimmer of the Maid of Orleans flashed through his mind. She had endured days of being put to the "Question" with distinct courage; he could do no less in her memory. She had given him hope that his soul could be salvaged. He had believed her and continued to believe her. She had been a truly holy person, not a poor imitation as his captors were.

Knowing that Nicolas was suddenly paying no heed to his attentions, Rodrigo yanked Nicolas' head back with a large hand in the lank blond locks that hung down to the prisoner's shoulders. Abruptly Nicolas was no longer watching Joan bravely endure the flames that caused her demise while he had looked on helplessly. She hadn't wanted or needed his assistance. She had her own faith which had maintained her physically and mentally. Her grace and nobility had humbled him. He didn't have her strength or faith, he knew.

"Am gonna have ta leave ya for a while to get ready for Mass," Rodrigo said as he began dismantling the chains that held Nicolas' arms to the bars of the cross. He had been nailed there by his hands, but the structure of the human hand even his vampiric hands, wouldn't have supported his weight so the lengths of chain had been wrapped around his arms. When the chains were removed, his own weight pulled his hands free of the thick nails. He whimpered

weakly as he slumped to the floor.

He tried to cradle his hands to his chest while Rodrigo and his stooges put his ragged clothes on him. After covering his nude figure, Rodrigo quickly chained his wrists together with lengths of the blessed chain. It took three of them to half-carry the struggling vampire then drag him down long narrow passageways and around corners. Nicolas lost all sense of distance and direction by the time one of them unlocked a heavy iron strapped door and shoved him through it. He staggered then collapsed in a heap just inside the door.

Nicolas' innate time sense told him that the sun was rising, and it was time for him to rest. He hadn't felt this strong a need to rest during the day since the early days of his change. His chained hands were healing with painful slowness as was the rest of his battered body. He didn't know why Rodrigo had released him from the Interrogation Chamber, but he was grateful for the respite. In his disoriented state, he didn't connect Rodrigo's need to go to Mass with his liberation from the chamber.

Shuffling away from the door in the pitch black, he slumped against the wall and slid thankfully into near vampiric hibernation.



Nick was jarred from mental time displacement by a crackling of lightning and explosions of the mercury vapor lights overhead. He watched as the mist gathered itself into bolts that leapt from the figure lying in the dust to the standing man, then to light fixtures and windows which blew apart and crackled with a life of their own. Fascinated, he didn't move as the man still on his feet slowly sank to debris-strewn earth and flung the sword from his hands. With his fists braced on his thighs the man panted and shook with the final pyrotechnical display. Slowly the unnatural fog dispersed back into the heavens as the victor rose to his feet, reaching for his weapon as he did.

Nick thought he was back in the shadows, but the Immortal had spotted him. The man was slender with short-cropped dark hair. He began walking toward Nick. It was too late to escape his attention.

"Are you his watcher?" the dark-haired man said with an unidentifiable accent, walking toward Nick.

Nick didn't answer the puzzling question. He just

soaked in the knowledge that here was someone from his past who didn't hold a grudge; someone he had parted from who might remember him with fondness. He stepped into the full moonlight and began closing the distance to the other man. Then stopped to see if he was also recognized.

The Immortal shook his head and murmured, "I remember you!" His own dim memories of a chance meeting in the mountains of Spain was thrust into the foreground momentarily as he walked toward Nick standing very still in the empty lot. The silence between the two was long and tense.

"It *has* been a long time," Nick finally commented, staring at the angular face of the other type of Immortal.

"Nicolas! I can't quite believe it," Methos commented, still stunned from the Quickening and the appearance of the vampire from his past. "You still go by the name of Nicolas?"

"Nick — Nick Knight, Vancouver P.D., actually," Nick responded, "And yourself — still Methos?"

"Adam Pierson to most people. There are few that know me as Methos."

"Do —"

"Do —"

Neither man had the opportunity to ask their question. Nick heard the rattle of machine gun fire as Methos fell into his arms in a parody of a lover's greeting. The vampire was startled as the other man's weight struck him. In a flail of limbs he fell to the ground, holding Methos on top of him. He was instinctively protecting the other from falling to the hard packed earth. He knew it wasn't necessary, but his instincts took over. His keen ears heard the rushing of feet across the empty lot. Deciding to play possum for a few minutes, he waited to see what the assassin was planning. When the footsteps stopped, he peered over Methos' shoulder just as he heard the snick of a blade being removed from its sheath. Immediately, he realized what the assassin had in mind. *He was going to make the Immortal's death permanent.*

Shoving Methos' weight from him, he erupted from the ground, not pausing to regain his feet. He caught the sword in mid arc. The blade bit into his hand and arm, but by the time that had registered he had his other hand on the person's wrist. Vaguely, he heard a snapping of human bone, but he was determined that the sword wasn't going to finish the job that the automatic weapon had started. After the sword hit the

ground, he hit the man a sharp blow behind the ear. He turned and let his enhanced senses scan the area for anything else lurking in the dark. He identified a cat rattling some garbage cans in the alley, but no more human or near human life.

Turning his attention back to the unconscious assassin lying limply on the solid earth, he reached to his belt and took his handcuffs out of their case. Not being especially gentle, he cuffed the man's hands behind him.

There was nothing but silence from his ancient friend stretched out on the ground where he had left him. He went back to the still figure. He settled on the damp soil and took Methos in his arms, brushing dirt from his still, peaceful face. He remembered from experience that it might take Methos a while to revive from the wounds.

He studied the strangely handsome face. The man looked as bad as he looked when Nick had first met him. His normally lean body was honed to almost emaciation. There wasn't an ounce of spare flesh on him. His face was shadowed in a light beard and his dark hair was unkempt and badly in need of a decent cut. There was something distinctly wrong in Methos' current life, he decided. He would try to find out. He owed the man a great deal. In fact, he probably owed him his life such as it was.

As he sat beneath the fat full moon, his memory dredged up more ancient incidents that he had thought behind him.

Spain — Nick

It was hours later when Nicolas became aware of numerous throbbing hearts and a nerveracking metallic screech of rusty hinges followed by the scraping of his cell door opening. He raised his head and scanned the cell. His Hunger was an overriding torment now. In the Interrogation Chamber, his Hunger had been evident, but a sense of danger and fear for his own survival had dampened it. Now after a period of rest and relief from constant menace, it became an overwhelming force. It woke him in this cell in the middle of the day when all his other instincts told him to rest and heal. As he scanned the darkness of the cell, his need for sustenance and fear of the unknown lent him the strength to rip the chains from his wrists. There was a momentary pain-filled

scream from a bundle that was dropped into his line of vision.

The dim daylight from the passageway filtering into the cell revealed his new companion huddled on the floor, clutching his middle. His ragged breathing punctuated by the occasional moan filled the cell. Frantically trying to control his Beast as the smell of blood engulfed him, Nicolas studied his cell mate. The man was as filthy as Nicolas himself. The man's dark hair was matted with a muck that Nicolas didn't want to speculate on. His beard-bristled chin rested on an emaciated chest. Obviously he wasn't here for his health either. The blood stains on the mildewed straw beneath the man were slowly growing; the frantic heartbeat was weakening. The frail human body was failing as Nicolas watched. There was a death rattle in the man's lungs. It was then that Nicolas noticed that the man had been almost completely disemboweled; he was slowly dying from the gaping wound.

Nicolas' natural compassion was fighting a losing battle with his Beast. Besides he told himself, the man wouldn't survive the next hour no matter what Nicolas did. If he did, it would be a painfully long hour for him.

He rose to his feet and then literally flew the few feet across the cell. Before his victim was aware of this new danger, Nicolas had him by the throat. His elongated canines pierced the soft folds of skin beneath the man's chin. Instinctively, the canines sought and found the large vein near the surface. Shaking his quarry as a hunting dog might, Nicolas drank the fresh, spicy liquid life. This person's blood was sweeter and more satisfying than he ever remembered from any of his prey. His intellect was certain this was an illusion born of his long starvation.

The figure in his hands became limp as the overworked heart began to flutter. Through the blood came images of sword duels; fights that ended with wild lightning. These duels and occasional wars were interspersed with long moments of peace in holy places. Nicolas saw long laborious hours spent copying ancient texts. Even one long trip over water in a small boat with cowed figures shrieked out of the man's blood.

Eventually the images became dark and recent. Nicolas vicariously experienced similar tortures as his own from this rich blood; he nearly threw the

dying body from him. With those images fresh in his mind, he could almost justify taking this human life. If nothing else, he could know that he had spared the man from having to withstand more abuse before his life ended. Then the weakly throbbing heart was stilled for all time. Nicolas slowly, almost reverently, withdrew his fangs from the cooling flesh. The yellowish cast to his eyes began to fade into the natural deep blue of Nicolas, the man.

As his teeth regained their human aspect, Nicolas lowered the body back to the dirt floor of the cell. He then rose and stood back to pay homage to his savior. Because of the strength afforded him by this man's blood, he had a chance to escape from the monastery and the surrounding countryside, he thought.

Nicolas' innate time sense told him the sun was still high in the sky so he settled back to wait with his silent companion for the coming dusk. Before sinking down in his corner, he moved the body to another corner and lightly covered it with damp straw, not for his own sensibilities, but to give the dead man a certain amount of dignity in death. He had served Nicolas well.

Vancouver — 1997

Nick's keen ears heard the faint heartbeat as the organ restarted itself, and the sound drew him back from his rather unpleasant memories of those distant days. He shifted the weight in his arms and waited for the minor convulsion that would signal his companion's returning consciousness. He didn't have to wait long.

Looking somewhat disoriented, Methos pulled out of Nick's arms and tried to struggle to his feet, finally accepting help from him. He saw the man on the ground and looked back at Nick.

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

"No."

"Good, I have some questions for this bastard."

"I can imagine," Nick said dryly. "He was trying to finish you off for good. And obviously he knows exactly how to kill you." He kicked idly at the sword of the assassin then reached down and picked it up. "Is he one of your kind or human?"

"He's human if you can call it that." Methos gave an uncharacteristically evil grin, Nick thought.

Studying the stubby gun lying on the ground, Nick

said, "Not exactly part of The Game as you explained it to me once."

"No," Methos answered shortly and not expanding on his thoughts.

"Care to explain what's going on?" Nick inquired almost gently. He was aware of the tension in the figure next to him. There *was* something going on, and it had Methos almost frantic.

Methos looked over at Nick with troubled eyes. "My old friend, we could be here the rest of the night if I tried to explain, and I don't think that's such a good idea. These pyrotechnics usually draw some sort of attention."

Nick nodded.

"I want to question this guy," Methos continued. "If you can't help me, then don't try to hinder me."

The dark-haired man turned away, probably trying to hide his emotion, Nick decided.

"Well, is there some place private that I can have a chat with this guy?" Methos ungently kicked the still body, as he turned back to face Nick.

Nick studied his old friend. He'd drunk this man's blood and there hadn't been an evil bone in his body then. Possibly he could have changed, but Nick didn't think so. He had as shadowed a past as Nick himself, but had left it long behind him by the time they had met. And besides, who was Nick to judge anyone on their past sins. Quickly deciding that he had trusted this man with his life and reason before, and he could trust him in this situation. If the "questioning" got out of hand, he was confident he could overwhelm the Immortal and put a stop to it.

"My car's in the alley two blocks over. We could go there."

"Right. Mine's a rental and I wouldn't want to get blood all over the upholstery," Methos said, gathering up the swords and his long coat.

"What about the body?" Nick looked over at the headless corpse forgotten like old garbage.

"I know someone who can handle it," Methos said, reaching for the cellular phone in his coat pocket. He punched buttons to a discordant hum under his breath.

"Joe, I've gotta slight problem?" There was an indistinct buzz as the other party made some comment.

"Yeah, it was O'Leary," Methos sounded weary — sad. "Just take care of the bastard." Then he listened to the voice on the other end of the connection for a few

minutes more before ending the conversation with the address of the empty lot and a mumbled agreement to come back to Seattle.

"Joe'll take care of that problem," Methos looked at Nick and then nodded at the headless corpse sprawled next to a light pole a few yards away.

While Methos had been on the phone, Nick had searched the suspect and came up with a passport made out to a Michael Kelly of Boston. He handed the passport to Methos.

"Know this guy?"

"Damn," Methos interjected. "He's O'Leary's Watcher." Nick ignored the unfamiliar term again. He had the hunch it wasn't the appropriate time to question Methos on details.

Little emotion played on his features as Nick gathered the limp figure into his arms then into a fireman's carry and began leading the way back to his car. As long as the dead body was disposed of, he was happy. It had been a fair duel, and he had no interest in reporting it to the authorities.

By the time they reached the car, the assassin was moaning in pain as he was awakening from Nick's blow to his head. Nick settled him onto the backseat and the other Immortal shoved in beside him, leaving Nick to get in the front seat and watch.

The would-be killer's head flopped limply to the back of the seat with an accompanying groan. Methos grabbed the damaged arm and squeezed it viciously. "Why'd you try to kill me? What's your connection to O'Leary besides being his Watcher?" Methos squeezed the arm harder, causing his victim to whimper. "Talk, damn you!" The man's eyes were open now, but there was still a glazed look in them.

Nick watched the procedure with some concern. Admittedly the man might deserve the rough handling, but Nick was uncomfortable with the whole thing. It smacked too much of unnecessary violence.

"Stop," Nick said, reaching out to pull Methos' hand away from the human's injured arm.

Methos' tried to yank away his hand and found it in an iron grip. Nick knew from the expression on his face that the Immortal had forgotten just how strong a vampire could be.

"Why? Gone a bit soft, have you, Nicolas? I remember a few priests and soldiers that didn't get much mercy from you."

"Times change and we have to change with them."

Or we remain barbarians forever."

"Barbarian! Yes, I've been a barbarian and gave it up. Now I'm dealing with barbarians again, and I'll fight the battle on their terms, if I have to. I want to know this guy's connection with the bastard in the alley. That man killed someone very close to me and now this one wants to kill me. I'd like to know why and if there's any more like him waiting for me."

Nick understood. Methos was nearly raging at him with a wild glint in his eyes. The pupils of those normally greenish eyes were wide, showing the distress of their owner. There was more here than he understood. And he knew that his old friend could have been driven over the edge by these unknown events. But he owed the immortal for old debts.

"Let me try. I might have better luck." Nick got out of the front seat of the car, pulled Methos out, and gave him an almost gentle shove to the open door and front seat of the car.

As the would-be assassin opened his eyes, Nick's turned gold. He concentrated on overcoming the man's natural resistance to the questioning. His skills with hypnotism might be rusty, but eventually they were as effective as ever.

"Why did you try to kill this man?" Nick said, nodding his head toward Methos.

"He killed O'Leary."

"But it was a fair duel between two Immortals?"

"Yeah, so what? This bastard was going to screw up the deal just like the one in Paris was going to."

"What deal?"

"Why the guns and stuff in some warehouse around here. We've been making good money for years selling that kind of junk to the IRA or anyone else with the ready cash. O'Leary stayed mainly in Ireland — his cover as a monk worked really well. No one suspected Brother Liam of doing business with me or the IRA. Then some bastard in Paris got wind of the deal so I blasted him and O'Leary took his head."

"The son of a bitch was using his Watcher identity to cover their gun-running activities," Methos muttered.

"Why were you in Paris?"

"Had a shipment of some of those Famas guns to collect, and this MacLeod guy was getting awfully nosey. O'Leary challenged, and I got there early. Tonight I didn't know this other one was so close to O'Leary. We knew he'd been tracking us all across the

States, but could never get him cornered. Then I was only a block away when all the lightning and shit started. I knew what happened. I was gonna kill the bastard 'cause now I don't know where the guns are, and I'm out the money. That son of a bitch ruined everything; he deserves to lose his head."

"That's enough," Nick said.

There was a groan from the front seat and the door banged open and scraped the curb. Then a deep retching sound as Methos vomited helplessly in the gutter.

Nick took a few moments to erase the unorthodox questioning from his victim's mind and cuff him to the bar in the back of the Mercedes. Then he got out of the back seat and went over to the man squatted on the curb. As he went through a series of dry heaves, Nick knelt beside him and stroked the back of his neck. Finally his body gave the last spasm and he slumped against Nick, quivering with emotion. Nick held him until he thought he heard distant sirens. He wasn't sure how long they sat locked in an embrace on the hard concrete of sidewalk.

"Oh God, I knew O'Leary couldn't have taken Mac in fair fight. I just didn't want to hear it."

Pulling Methos to his feet, he settled him in the front seat of the Merc and handed him a handkerchief.

"Thanks for your help, Nicolas," Methos said, wiping his mouth as color began coming back into his face. "The bastard's mine. Don't worry, the Vancouver Police won't find the body."

"No! We're, or rather, I'm going to take him down to the station and book him." Nick flashed his badge at Methos who only glanced at it.

"Don't you understand? He killed a friend of mine. And what would you arrest him for — attempted murder of an Immortal?" Methos smiled grimly.

"Suspicion of smuggling illegal weapons into Canada."

"You've got no proof — just what he said a few minutes ago. And I don't see him confessing all in the police station."

"I do have some proof." Nick reached into to the front seat of the car and brought out a Beretta submachine gun — the weapon that Kelly had used on Methos. "I don't know about other police forces, but here in Canada when we find someone walking the streets carrying this kind of weapon, we automatically question them."

"Yes, but how is that going to tie him into smuggling?"

"Coincidentally, I was coming from a drug bust tonight when I saw the Quickenings. Stored in the warehouse that the drug dealers were using for distribution was a large stockpile of automatic weapons, some like that Beretta, and other stuff. Anyhow, it's simply suspicious to find someone with this kind a gun in the same area where we found other weapons of a similar type." Nick smiled thinly. "I don't think the RCMP will mind taking charge of our friend over here."

"He killed a friend of mine." Methos turned and stared at the brick wall beside the car. His voice was thick with emotion as he continued, "Mac was the best of us. He didn't deserve to be shot like a dog in the street. He had a kind of nobility that you don't see often these days."

"Don't you think in this case that your friend would prefer that we catch the smugglers rather than you having your revenge? We need to give the RCMP have all the help we can. It sounds like these smugglers are well organized and have been around for a while. The Mounties need to question him. They need to find the whole smuggling ring — your vengeance will have to wait."

"No, Nicolas, I'm gonna strangle this guy with my bare hands." Methos lunged for the back seat only to be thwarted by long lean fingers that grasped him in an iron grip.

"Stop. This guy is the only connection we have to that warehouse full of weapons. Weapons that could have been shipped anywhere in the world. We need to find that smuggling ring, and right now, he's the only lead." Nick shook the Immortal almost gently, but it rattled Methos' teeth. "You killed the Immortal involved. Let the Mounties handle the mortals involved. Your testimony as a witness will almost assuredly place him very close to the scene and back up my report. You simply are a lost tourist and saw Kelly with the gun."

Methos yanked free of Nick's grasp, slid out of the car again, and stood on the sidewalk. He turned and paced the concrete, seeming to study each individual crack and seam. Nick allowed him the time.

It was then that Nick noticed the blood stains and bullet holes in his coat. As the Immortal still walked deep in thought, he went to the trunk of his car and got out some clothes. He changed his shirt and jacket. It took only a few minutes and would forestall any

questions down at headquarters.

Opening the door on the driver's side, he slid under the wheel and waited while Methos continued his speculations.

"Okay, I'll let you take him in. Mac would have appreciated it being done all legal and proper. That's the only reason I'm going along with this. But remember this, if the bastard gets off, I'll find him."

To show he definitely understood, Nick nodded slowly and emphatically then said, "Where's your car?"

"Just around the corner from the empty lot."

"I'll take you back to it, and you can follow me back to the precinct where we'll settle our friend in for a few days at least. Change *your* shirt and coat before we get to the station. I don't want to have to explain all the blood, and why neither one of us has any wounds to account for the blood." With a tight grin, Methos nodded.

The two Immortals separated under a street lamp beside an innocuous gray Taurus. "Do you have a place to stay?" Nick questioned Methos.

"Not yet. I thought I'd find a hotel to rest for a few hours then go back to Seattle."

"You can stay at my place. I've got to take a few days off. You can also explain a bit more about this O'Leary character and your MacLeod." Methos' face tightened at the mention of MacLeod's name.

It took a few hours to get Kelly treated for his broken arm then booked. Daylight was creeping up on him as Nick turned in his request for a two-week leave. It was quite convenient to have been ordered to take the time off.

While his old friend gave a statement to one of the RCMP officers just in from the warehouse, Nick did a bit of research of his own in the police computer net. He wondered if Methos was going to be some sort of loose cannon or was wanted anywhere.

As the printer hummed away at printing out his own statement of the incident, he scanned what he had discovered about Methos a.k.a. Adam Pierson. There hadn't been much, but Interpol had a few records of some altercations with Pierson. He thought these probably had to do with the ongoing Immortal Game. There was nothing in the records to raise his suspicions

that Methos had changed all that much from when he had known him.

The printer stopped and he gathered up the sheets from the bin and took them to the Captain's office. The Captain and the rest of crew still weren't back from the warehouse, so he left the printouts in the *In* basket on the Captain's desk.

Methos returned from the interview room looking even more haggard than he had earlier. Nick wondered when last he'd had anything to eat.

Shutting down his computer, he turned to the other man. In the quiet predawn, even the squad room was quiet. "Time for you to get some food in you and to get some rest," Nick said quietly to Methos, who was standing in front of his desk. "Follow me back to my place. I think there's a few things in stock."

Methos nodded. He seemed to be in shock, or simply numb.

As Nick led the way back to his home, he let the memories of the crash into his conscious mind.



Spain — Nick

The moon was full as the gray mare picked her way delicately through the boulders then on down the slope. Her rider directed her to the narrow pathway that wound through the low hills. Nicolas de Brabant enjoyed the peace and quiet that this journey was affording him. His master and mentor, LaCroix, had chosen not to travel, but to build his chateau which would rest upon the foundations of his Roman Villa in the French countryside. Nicolas and Janette had quickly become impatient with all the details that fascinated their Master. Reluctantly, LaCroix had allowed them the freedom to go their own way while he worked with the builders — such was his current obsession with replacing his former villa. Janette had chosen Paris and the excitement of court life afforded her by a longtime friend, Phillipe de Marchant.

Nicolas had long wanted to explore on his own. Surprisingly LaCroix had agreed that it was time Nicolas did some adventuring alone. Thus, with the rarely given good wishes of his master/mentor, he had set out to test the limits of the sudden loosening of his master's leash. He was enjoying the solitude of the nights on the trail. Usually he spent days in small inns located in tiny villages. Sometimes he sat and simply

relished watching the mortals about their daily tasks or chatting with the local innkeeper. Often he rested in the numerous caves available in the mountains he was crossing.

The mare skittered sideways on the trail, and Nicolas soothed her with his hand. She had sensed something before he had. His thoughts hadn't been on the trail which was now traversing a dark forest that nearly obscured the silvery moon. He was going to pay for his inattention. Reaching out with his enhanced senses, he could feel mortals closing in on all sides. He reached for his sword at his waist just as the mare lurched, nearly unseating him. Dropping the reins, he grabbed the broadsword in both hands and swung at a dim figure to his right. The mare dropped back on her haunches as another man grabbed her bridle. Leaning over her head, Nicolas swung the heavy Crusader sword again, decapitating the villain who had been dragging the horse down. With her head free, the mare started to leap forward again while Nicolas thrust his sword at a tousled-haired man grabbing for his leg, hoping to unseat him. Then the mare seemed to sink down, and Nicolas kicked free from his stirrups as the mare seemed to lose her footing. Levitating and leaping, Nicolas wrenched his sword from the belly of the tousled-haired man. He turned and skewered another jumping over the falling horse. In the flurry of activity, Nicolas began to lose track of how many there had been and how many he had maimed or killed. He found himself scant minutes later standing in the narrow roadway the only thing alive except for his horse. He spun around in all directions seeking any other attackers.

He heard a struggle behind him and turned to see the mare trying to gain her feet with forelegs stretched in front of her. He was heartsick when he saw the reason for her lack of success. He snarled and wished he had killed some of them a little slower, perhaps roasting them over his campfire. The mare had been hamstrung during the skirmish. Nicolas was momentarily devastated.

Regaining his senses, he reached to his belt and pulled out his large skinning knife then approached her panic-stricken head. Her normally soft brown eyes were rolling wildly in her head. He tried to soothe her as he grabbed the headstall of the bridle in one hand and made a quick slashing motion with the heavy knife. He had struck true and a bright gout of blood erupted over his hands. He held her head in his hands

and lowered her gently to the ground as her struggles became more and more feeble, then stilled. He nearly wept. For long moments, he knelt at her head with his own head bowed as his hands gently stroked the slowly cooling wide forehead. In tribute, not need, he licked her blood from his hands and savored the faintly musky flavor that he would have normally disdained.

Hearing a low moan, he stood and turned away from the mare's body. One of the men he had opened with his blade was struggling to get to his feet. With inhuman speed Nicolas pounced on him. He had no qualms at grabbing the wounded figure and yanking his head back to sink his fangs into the grimy neck. The vampire in him gloried in the kill. The human knight gloried in the kill, as well; the mare had some portion of her revenge too.

When the thief's heart stopped beating, Nicolas quickly snapped his neck then threw him on the ground in disgust. He didn't give the scoundrel any of the gentleness he had shown the horse.

Looking around, he noticed that his packs had fallen under the mare's body. He went over and easily lifted the thousand-pound carcass off his belongings. He sorted through them and brought out a clean tunic since the one he wore was heavily spattered with human and horse blood.

Sniffing the air like a terrier seeking a rat, he discerned a brook a few hundred yards from the road. He stripped off his blood-soaked shirt and walked down to the water. He scrubbed both his clothes and his person clean. Before he had been brought across, he wouldn't have thought anything of wearing the filthy clothes, but LaCroix demanded cleanliness from his children. It was something that both he and Janette had found hard to understand at first then eventually to enjoy for its own sake.

He repacked his bags, hanging the damp tunic outside, then shouldered them and set off toward the next village. He gave no more thought to the miscreants that had tried to rob him. He would simply pay someone from the village to dispose of the carcasses and retrieve the mare's tack.



The blond vampire huddled in his corner of the dark, damp cell, remembering over and over again his

folly. With his enhanced sense of hearing, he listened to the chanting of the mass coming from the choir somewhere above the dungeon. As always, he found the music calming to his soul or at least his consciousness. He wasn't sure he had a soul to assuage any longer. He leaned back against the clammy wall, remembering his accusers.

As in any witch trial, there had to be two. And there were two. Two of the robbers had testified to seeing him drink the blood of one of their comrades and pick up the horse to get his belongings. It was damning evidence. The two had been in the trees, too frightened to flee and too fascinated by the one they had hoped to rob.

Even though the atmosphere had reeked of blood and death, he should have been able to feel them or hear their frightened hearts. But in his own arrogance and carelessness, he had assumed if there were any survivors of the attack that they were long gone. He hadn't imagined they had stayed around to see him kill their wounded friend and pick up the horse.

After watching Nicolas in the woods, the thieves had gone to the priests and threw themselves on the mercy of the Church in their superstitious fear. The priests had sent a brother down to the village to watch the young French knight. After some days of observing that he never left the inn during the day or ate in anyone's presence, he had reported back to Father Ramirez that the miscreants were possibly telling the truth.

Nicolas had been taken by a large number of monks and priests the night he had planned to leave. He had been delayed leaving the town because he had been trying to replace the gray mare, and it had taken days to finally find a satisfactory mount in this remote area.



Methos followed the brownish Mercedes through glistening damp streets. Light glittered up from the puddles as he thought of the chance meeting of so many long years ago when he had met the young vampire. He hadn't thought about the incident for a lot of years. He was trying to remember what he knew of the man. He wondered if he could trust him. There were so few he could trust any more. To avoid thinking about the present time, he let himself drift to the past.



Spain — Methos:

Damn, he hated this. It was the normal disorientation of dying and reviving. He had lost count of how many times this had taken place recently. He knew when he opened his eyes he would be once more in a dark cell. Then his tormentors would return and start all over again. He wondered how long he would remain sane. For long moments, he hoped that his mind would break soon and possibly free him. Perhaps their next form of death would involve taking his head. He thought then dismissed the idea of telling them how to really kill him. He wasn't quite ready to give up entirely. He hadn't lived over 4,000 years to succumb to a few short weeks of torture by these religious fanatics.

A rustle in the cell caused the newly awakened Immortal to leap to his feet reaching for the now non-existent sword that he had carried for centuries. Peering through the dimly reflected sunlight from the passageway, he saw a compelling golden-eyed creature studying him from the opposite side of the narrow cell. He slammed himself back against the unyielding stone wall with his mind screaming silently in terror. Unconsciously, his hand reached to his neck. Primeval racial memories and recent subconscious memories nearly had him gibbering at the sight of the clearly supernatural figure advancing toward him.

"Merde!" he muttered softly. The thing stopped and studied him while its eyes slowly changed from the glittering gold to a deep cerulean blue.

"What are you?" the ancient immortal continued, speaking in French. Obviously the thing had understood and heard his whispered explicative in that language. Then the Immortal suddenly knew what he was facing. He'd heard of the undead, but in his long life, this was his first meeting with one.

For long moments, the two tormented inhuman creatures studied each other in the waning light of the cell.

"I could ask you the same question." The other finally broke the pregnant silence of the moment. "You were dead most of the day. I know I killed you, and if I hadn't, your wounds most certainly would have."

The apparition advanced slowly toward the thin

figure pressed against the solid wall. He put a hand out toward the completely healed neck. Methos flinched from the other's touch and tried to back deeper into the wall and wondered briefly if this was some new form of torture contrived by the Interrogators. Was the Undead One working with the priest? An unlikely alliance, he thought. Memories came crashing into his conscious mind as the Immortal remembered being shoved into a cell after a long sharp sword had pierced his belly. Now he vaguely remembered through the intense anguish of his disembowelment of being grabbed and a sharp pain in his throat was added to rest of his death agonies. He shivered as the long tapered fingers mapped his neck for any sign of damage. The thing's other hand shoved away the blood-stained rags; his bright blue eyes examined the man's recently healed torso. Then the hands fell away from him.

The creature obviously noticed the fear he was inspiring and had the sudden understanding that the slender quivering body before him was no threat, for the creature swept his hand down and gave a graceful if incongruous bow. "Nicolas de Brabant at your service." Nicolas had been raised in a small but formal court where such courtesies were ingrained in the fosterlings. "And to answer your earlier question, I am one of the Children of the Night. Care to explain yourself."

The relaxing tension in the cell was almost palpable.

"Methos at your service," the ancient Immortal answered, giving his true name for the first time in centuries, somehow knowing that the individual before him could discern lies almost before they were spoken. Methos didn't bow but simply straightened his shoulders against the stones. "And I can't quite explain myself so easily."

The Child of the Night nodded, then slowly backed into his corner of the cell, never losing eye contact as Methos slid slowly down the wall to squat in the foul straw that had covered his dead body. Both men watched the other for a few minutes, trying to assimilate the information their senses had received. Both heard the continuing chanting of the priests celebrating mass in the chapel above them. The gentle music was in such contrast to the activities that took place in the lower chambers.

Methos saw that the bright blue eyes were scrutinizing him intently. He knew he would be seeing

a slender man with a short, unkempt beard which covered an angular but young face. He knew there wasn't a mark on his body now.

In turn, Methos studied the man across from him. Was it even human? An unbidden thought surfaced. He knew what he had seen as he had recovered. He had seen those currently mild blue eyes a gleaming gold. He also remembered this thing had drunk his blood. If it wanted to, it could again and there wasn't much he could do about it.

Clearing his parched throat, Methos said, "We might answer each other's questions." Looking around the barren cell, he continued, "Doesn't seem to be too much to amuse someone in a place like this."

Nicolas' head came up from its private reverie. Glancing at the firmly closed cell door, he smiled at the weak quip made by his companion.

"No, they save all the entertainment for other places around here." Nicolas hesitated and shifted to a more comfortable position. He took a deep breath and looked at his companion, eyes gleaming gold and fangs extending.

Methos registered the gleaming eyes and protruding teeth even in the fading light. His body prepared for fight or flight with increased respiration and heartbeat. Obviously his companion noticed his reaction because the dirty blond head dropped, and when it was again raised the eyes were a sparkling blue and the mouth was firmly closed. Methos noted with relief the restraint demonstrated. Demon or undead, Methos thought he might be able to trust him.

"This is difficult for me," Nicolas murmured.

"Vampire!" Methos said, his mind finally verbalizing his suspicions. "Child of the Night — Vampire." He repeated it as if to savor the word.

"Yes," came the quiet answer from across the small cell.

"How did they capture you?"

"It was easy with the right tools — crosses, holy water, rosary beads...." Nicolas' answer trailed off into the gloom.

"And you're starving."

"You might say that." Nicolas' head came up with his eyes gleaming a bright rose gold. "As the sun has set, I think it's time to get out of here if you are to survive me." Nicolas rose and began walking toward the cell door.

"You killed me earlier, and I survived." Methos

followed his cell mate to the door and watched him examine it.

"And you haven't explained that."

"It isn't easy and will take time. But my kind doesn't die so easily." The Immortal shifted his weight. "Do you have a plan?"

"Not really. Nothing but surprise. I've been so weak lately that they have gotten quite careless."

Methos watched the haggard vampire run his hands over the door and nod as he found various weak spots. He slid a long slender finger under the top hinge. It moved ever so slightly.

"Perhaps with the two of us, the surprise would be even greater," Methos commented.

"Normally their pattern is to come for me in the mornings when I'm weakest," Nicolas commented casually, continuing to look at the door and almost ignore his companion. "I can't wait for morning." Turning to the other man, "I can't survive in daylight — so I have to try tonight. One more session with Rodrigo might be the end of me."

"I can understand that," Methos answered as he bent over to look at the lower hinge. "I'm sure I won't be much help with this door."

"The door will pose no problem now," Nicolas said. It was long moments before Methos realized that the vampire was referring obliquely to his recent feeding on him. He nearly fled to the other side of the cell again.

There was a slight noise of footfalls in the hall and without any verbal communication both immortals resumed their places. Methos sank to the floor to look as dead as possible and Nicolas grabbed up his chains and wrapped them loosely about his hands before sinking back to the floor where he'd spent most of the day. The footsteps continued on down the corridor and they looked at each other while breathing a sigh of relief.

"It might be better to wait until later," Methos said, settling himself down on the sour smelling straw. Crinkling his prominent nose, the man said while turning on his side toward the wall, "I'm going to get some rest."



Spain — Nick:

Nicolas felt the moon rising and had heard no

sounds from the corridor for nearly two hours. Rising with cat-like grace and silence, he went to wake his companion and found himself staring into wide open greenish eyes.

"I had wondered if you would honor your bargain to take me out of here with you. I had hoped you would." Methos commented softly as he gained his feet.

"I think it's time. There hasn't been anybody out in the passage for a couple of hours."

"I know."

Raising one eyebrow, Nicolas turned away and went to the door and listened carefully. There was nothing to be heard. The dimly lit hallway was as still as death. Taking a long, slender finger, he inserted it carefully in the groove beneath the clasp of the hinge. Feeling his eyes make the change, he gave a yank and the hinge splintered the oak as it fell from the door. Methos grabbed the hinge before it could hit the floor. Nicolas nodded at the assistance then leaned over to repeat the same process with the middle and bottom hinge. Before the door could start to slip, he grabbed the bars on the window and lifted the door from its frame, allowing Methos to catch the rest of the hardware before it hit the floor. Carefully to avoid as much noise as possible, he gently set the door on the straw-littered floor.

Leaning through the door frame, he scanned the area with all of the senses at his disposal, and they were formidable. There was no discernible human presence in the nearby corridor or even the cells. The dungeon he and Methos had been occupying wasn't overcrowded. Gesturing with his hand at his companion, he left the cell. Methos followed silently behind him. Nicolas hadn't been completely conscious when he had been brought down here so he was only following the most traversed way according to his vampiric senses. They passed one room that nearly overwhelmed him. The scent of death and destruction was so strong that he paused and looked back at his new-found ally. The slender man nodded. He, too, remembered what was behind the closed door. Nicolas had the urge to crash through the door and destroy everything in his path. He felt a hand on his arm pushing him on down the hall. He followed the tender entreaty. It was as if Methos understood the force calling him to the Interrogation Chamber and empathized.

Turning a corner from the Interrogation

Chamber, they found a long set of stairs leading upwards into some hidden reaches of the church closed off by another oak door. Still Nicolas couldn't sense any humans so they proceeded with caution. Extending all his senses, Nicolas was repelled by the aura of the altar ahead of them. He overrode any distaste and moved to the top of the stairs with a whoosh of displaced air. Methos came upwards at a more moderate pace. He was startled at the swiftness of his companion, but didn't let it deter him from climbing the worn stone steps in his own more human fashion.

There was a whisper of activity in the room behind the closed doors. Nicolas sensed that a human was coming toward them. As it opened, he grabbed the man and closed his long fingers over the throat before any sound could erupt.

As luck would have it, it was Rodrigo's throat that Nicolas was squeezing. Eyes gleaming, he pulled the luckless torturer to him and bared his fangs. It took only moments to drain the life of his one-time tormentor and snap his neck. Dropping the lifeless husk at Methos' feet, he felt rather than saw the horrified posture of the other immortal.

Not caring about Methos' sensibilities at this moment, Nicolas stealthily entered the room which seemed to serve as a storeroom. There was another heavy oak door on the other side of some casks and baskets. Again he moved with vampiric swiftness to this door. Looking back, he saw Methos making his way toward him. He gave him credit for courage to continue after seeing the death of Rodrigo. Nicolas put his ear to the door then looked at his companion and nodded.

Methos stood back as Nicolas gave a tremendous yank and the lock broke as the door was lifted from its hinges. Finding no one to bar their path, they ran lightly down the hallway that opened before them. Nicolas had no idea where to go, but only wanted to find the outside.

Both of them froze as there was noise at the end of the corridor. It seemed to be coming from a large group. Methos grabbed Nicolas' arm and shoved him through the door they were adjacent to. Nick knew that neither one of them wanted to confront a large group of priests or monks at this point.

Nicolas shivered and nearly bolted as he found himself confronted by the altar of the church. He was frozen starrng at the shining crucifix suspended over

the white marble reliquary. Methos didn't worry about his companion's anxieties; he only shoved him across in front of the altar to the confessional. He crammed both of them into it and pulled the door shut. Nicolas was shivering and nearly moaning in pain and terror. He hadn't been in a church in centuries due to fear of what was happening at the moment. He clung to Methos and nearly screamed in terror and pain. Terror of the holy artifacts that resided in every church and couldn't be desecrated even by such as Father Ramirez, and physical pain from touching anything remotely blessed was nearly driving him insane. His newly regained strength was quickly ebbing. Two feedings couldn't rebuild it enough to withstand the onslaught of this hallowed room.



Spain — Methos:

Methos felt the cool body that pressed against his own quiver then quake. He wasn't sure what sort of torment he was inflicting on his rescuer. He just knew that if Nicolas and he were retaken, it would be worse. He stroked the matted and tangled head that rested on his shoulder as they both sank to the floor. Methos listened to the activities outside and concentrated on breathing as quietly as he could.

There was further shuffling and finally silence in the church. Methos opened the door of the confessional carefully and saw no one was about. Gently he extracted himself from the quivering mass of cool flesh that was his former cell mate. Nicolas was helpless in this environment, Methos realized. He thought momentarily of leaving him to his fate. He had watched the demon rise in Nicolas as he killed Rodrigo. But he knew he couldn't leave even something like a vampire to the gentle ministrations of the priest that controlled this area.

He crept out of the confessional then stood. He noticed that Nicolas wasn't coming out. Nicolas was watching him with reddish streaks on his face from the tears of pain he had shed earlier. Methos motioned him to follow. Nicolas slowly climbed out of the claustrophobic cell and followed Methos down the main aisle away from the altar.

Once down at the main door of the chapel, Methos noticed the small spiral of smoke rising from his companion. He knew the vampire must be in pain and

hadn't said anything as they had moved slowly toward the door. But there was nothing he could do. It was a matter of survival to get out of the church and the area as soon as possible.

Methos gestured for Nicolas to wait as he carefully opened one of the large doors. He glanced around outside and down the long steps toward the village that nestled at the foot of the church. At this late hour, there wasn't any activity that he could see. He heard a noise behind them, turned and saw a footman rushing down the aisle toward them carrying a large sword. Obviously, Rodrigo had been found.

The footman started to shout just as Nicolas whirled and in that odd vampiric way was at the man's side almost instantaneously, his weakness no longer evident. The sound died aborning as Nicolas almost casually broke the footman's neck. Methos ran down the aisle and grabbed up the sword.

"Let's get out of here!" Methos nearly shouted as Nicolas stood frozen, clearly in pain from the nearby altar. Methos took Nicolas' arm and began urging him toward the door. Nicolas seemed to return to himself and broke into a shambling trot toward the door followed by Methos. Nicolas' last strength seemed to have left him after the short-lived battle with the footman. He stumbled against the font beside the door, overturning it. Like acid, the holy water seared the bared arm that was helping him regain his balance. He fell to the floor and the spilled water steamed as he hit it with his hands then his face. Methos charged up the aisle and pulled Nicolas away from the water and nearly had to carry him through the chapel door. Nicolas' blistered skin began healing at once.

Outside the church Nicolas smiled grimly while taking some deep breaths of air not contaminated by the church. The few moments wasted grabbing the sword could have been their undoing as there was yelling and loud footsteps back in the church. Methos took up the sword and turned back to face three footmen running out of the double doors. He struck at the first one and was dimly aware that Nicolas was handling the other two. However, there were more coming up from the side of the church. Nicolas managed to break the necks of the two who came out the chapel just as more came at him. It was obvious that he wasn't going to be recaptured so his defense took on an almost desperate quality. Methos had the same determination. Finally they were standing back

to back amongst the bodies of the dead and dying. The vampire must have seen the futility of trying to make a surreptitious exit and knew that they couldn't hold out much longer. The next thing Methos knew was that a strong arm gripped him under his sword arm. Then they leaped skyward over a group of shouting and screaming footmen. Methos suddenly became a very still Immortal. In all his many years, this was a new experience. Once over the walls of the monastery and village, Nicolas seemed to struggle then slowly dropped between some trees to earth.

Gratefully sinking down on the welcome ground amongst the trees of the forest, Methos could tell that Nicolas was nearly spent. He knew he had almost been dropped a couple of times, and he wasn't sure why he hadn't been. It would have been much easier for the vampire to make his escape without carrying another person. Methos was simply relieved that he hadn't.

Methos recovered first. He only had to recover from his terror of flying and from the stress of the escape. He knew that their escape would be short lived if they didn't put some space between them and the church. He stood and prodded the slumped vampire with his bare foot. Nicolas simply growled. His tattered clothing was disarrayed and the burned skin still showed a vile red. Methos knew his companion was probably exhausted, but he was disinclined to just walk off.

Raising his head, tangled blond hair tumbled away from golden eyes, Nicolas snarled, "Get away, Methos. I'm dangerous now. I'll kill you without thinking."

"Can't do that, my friend. The village isn't all that far away. Personally, I don't like the accommodations there, and I think we'd better find others."

Coming to his feet with that dazzling vampiric speed, Nicolas seized Methos by the upper arms. "You just don't get it. I'll kill you any minute if you don't put some distance between us."

"Yes, that might be an inconvenience, but we still have to put more distance between us and the village."

"Inconvenience!" The vampire snarled and bent his head with elongated canines toward the soft throat of Methos. Methos tipped his head back.

"If this is necessary, get on with it. Just don't

leave my body here for them to find."

The vampire paused, as if remembering that he could take from this one, and he would come back to life. He bent to his task again as Methos spoke. "If you must leave my carcass behind, be sure to behead it first."

Shock showed clearly on Nicolas' face as he raised his head and looked into the green depths of Methos' eyes. "It's the only way to kill my kind — permanently." Now that he'd said it, Methos wondered briefly if it had been a mistake. He was taking a chance, but so far the vampire had proved completely trustworthy.

Nicolas backed away and shivered. He looked at the night sky and the horizon obviously checking on the position of the sun. There was a couple of hours before the sun rose, and he had to find shelter before that. Methos waited patiently for him to make a decision.

"Actually if you are so weak that you must feed, do it now. Then let's get on with leaving this place."

"I really don't think we can take the time. I think I sense someone or something coming down the road over there."

Methos backed away as Nicolas reached for him. "Are you planning another aerial ballet? If so, give me some warning so I can at least shut my eyes."

"Then close your eyes. I remember a cave back up toward the mountains. I'll need shelter from the sun shortly."

"Is there any water nearby? I'm getting a bit thirsty."

"I don't know. Never thought of it."

Methos sighed and muttered something that sounded like, "Vampires!" Methos then stepped toward the vampire who simply grasped him under the arms and slung him over his shoulder. A startled, "Merde!" was all that Methos had time to say as the distinctive whoosh of air signified that Nicolas was moving somewhere in a hurry. Methos closed his eyes firmly, telling himself that the tears were brought on by the wind.

The next landing that Methos experienced was gentler than the first. Nicolas landed on a rocky ledge outside a small cave. He pulled Methos from his shoulder and set him on the ground. Smiling grimly, the vampire entered the cave and sniffed to see if it had become inhabited since he had left it a few weeks

ago. Methos followed him inside and glanced around at the cobwebs and scuttling insects.

"I've had worse refuges," he commented, "but not recently."

"I think that the hospitality of St. Ignacio's might qualify."

"Now that you mention it...." he let the words trail off as he saw his Nicolas' golden eyes moving toward him.

"I told you that you should have put distance between you and me," Nicolas said as he put his arms around the other man, pinning his arms to his sides. "I can make this more enjoyable, if you don't fight me."

"I wasn't planning on fighting you," Methos said pragmatically. "I know you need to feed and there isn't much on the menu but me." He didn't know why he wasn't running in terror, but he did know that he owed the vampire for getting him out of the dungeon. He'd have never been able to pull the doors off the hinges or overpower the footmen without Nicolas. And if this was what Nicolas needed, this was what Nicolas got. He'd died so often for the priests that one more time wouldn't matter.

"Let me hold you," Methos muttered and struggled ineffectually against the stronger vampire, trying to free his upper arms. Finally he settled for placing his hands lightly on the other's waist. Meantime Nicolas was licking his neck and kissing the pulse point under his ear. It was setting his whole body on fire. He suddenly understood the fascination that myth had with these sensual creatures.

Nicolas slowly lowered them both to the dusty floor. He took his time to prepare the immortal's neck. He worshiped the throat and ears, and even the sharp chin didn't lack for attention. Eventually he kissed Methos gently and deeply. Methos groaned as his body became aroused at all the intimate attention. Nicolas transferred his hands down lower, slipping them inside the leggings, and stroked the burgeoning erection. He stroked and coaxed him to eruption. As Methos threw back his head in rapture, Nicolas struck. He buried his teeth into the seemingly fragile neck. Methos struggled briefly as Nicolas continued to suck his life's blood then slumped into Nicolas' arms as the night seemed to close in around him.



"Merde! I hate this!" Methos muttered, unconsciously repeating himself. Then his green eyes found the worried blue eyes. "It's all right. It just takes me a minute to figure out where I am and what's going on." He noticed at that moment how gently he was being held by such a powerful creature. His memories churned back as he remembered the last moments before he died this time.

Yes, Nicolas had kept his promise. It was much more enjoyable this time. In fact, if he could have avoided completely dying, it would have been wonderful. He remembered the powerful orgasm followed by the prick of strong teeth at his throat. It had even been erotic to feel his blood being drained. Yes, they might have to work at this some more. There must be a way for him to survive this. Practice, my dear boy, he thought, practice.

"There's water down at the bottom of the ravine outside the cave," Nicolas said, kissing the top of Methos' head. "I don't know if there is any game close by, but after dark I can try to hunt."

"Water, what a lovely thought. I'll go in a while," Methos said, savoring the closeness of the moment even if his thirst after this last dying was intense. Also he would need some calories soon to maintain or eventually he would become weaker and weaker with each awakening. However, at the moment he was content to relax in his recent lover's arms even it was a very unconventional lover. Nicolas was smoothing his hair and watching the relaxed face carefully.

"You don't resent what I did."

"No, you needed something I had and I shared," Methos laughed gently. "I do think that there must be a solution to my dying every time. Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"No, LaCroix might know, but I have no desire to ask him."

"Who's LaCroix?" Methos noticed the bright blue eyes darkening at the question. He was on soft ground here. He knew he would have to tread carefully.

"My master, my mentor — he brought me across."

"Brought you across?"

"Made me into a vampire." Nicolas shuddered and not ungently pushed Methos off his lap. He rose to pace. Methos watched and decided to leave his new

friend to his fretting. He started to walk out into the bright sunshine.

Nicolas grabbed his arm, "Where are you going?"

Looking down at his imprisoned arm, he answered, "Just to get some of that water that you mentioned a while ago." Nicolas looked at Methos' arm and dropped it suddenly.

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"No, my friend, you weren't."

"You call me friend. Are you sure?"

"You got us out of that hell-hole. I couldn't have stood dying many more times before I went entirely insane. I'll thank you for that for a very long time."

"I couldn't have gotten out of the dungeon without you...er, your blood."

"So it took both of us. However it happened, it worked." Methos paused and looked at the troubled vampire. He knew somehow that this was no terribly ancient vampire, but a fairly recently changed one — recent in immortal terms. One that still wasn't comfortable with this change. He wondered if Nicolas would ever be comfortable with his existence. He could understand that it would be difficult, but what was done was done. The boy had to understand that. Perhaps it was the killing to live. Everything killed in one form or another to live. "Anyhow, I'm going for a drink and a bath. You can go tonight."

"Yes, and I'll go hunting for a deer or something then."

"Good. And we might think about getting some equipment tonight."

Nicolas nodded thoughtfully then said, "I seem to remember a farm or something on the road a few miles from the town. Maybe not a farm, but a dwelling of some sort. We might find something there."

"After dark, we'll go see what we can find. I'm going to be very hungry soon even if you're not." Methos laughed gently at the stricken look in the young vampire's eyes. He patted Nick on a shoulder, took up the sword, and slid out through the underbrush that hid the cave from sight.

The stream was just as Nicolas had told him. He threw off the filthy jerkin and leggings and carefully put the sword near at hand. Then he leaned down to drink his fill after which he strolled into the icy water, shivering. It was obviously snow fed at some point, was his mental observation through chattering teeth.

Just because he could survive at many temperatures humans couldn't, didn't mean he enjoyed it.

Taking a deep breath, he dunked his head into the water and scrubbed furiously at the ingrained grime and insects. This one washing in a mountain stream wouldn't take care of the entire problem. He had spent time in ancient Rome and hated the current fashion that there was something ungodly about cleanliness.

As he mused over the changes in custom that he had encountered in his many years, he put his few clothes into the stream and then beat them against the rocks into some semblance of cleanliness. He despaired of ever getting them clean enough to suit him. But it was better than nothing. He glanced around the stream as he climbed out. There was an abundance of edible items growing here. He slid into his wet clothes with his teeth rattling. Looking around, he saw some mushrooms and began picking them. He gathered other victuals such as rose hips, berries, and watercress. He rinsed nature's bounty in the cold water. He nibbled as he walked back to the cave relieved that his ancient skills learned as a very young immortal hadn't abandoned him.

Nicolas was waiting as he had to be. The sun would still be up for hours. He wasn't resting as he should be, Methos thought, as he came into the cave, nibbling on a mushroom.

"I should have thought to take your clothes down to the stream and wash them," he said casually as he finished off another mushroom. Nicolas came toward him and clasped him in his arms.

"I thought someone had caught up with you when you were gone so long."

"No, I took the sword and kept it handy. Just needed a good washing. Then I found a few things to eat."

"Just how old are you?" Nicolas questioned, showing curiosity for the first time.

"Oh, I was old when the pyramids were built," Methos said quickly. Noticing the darkening of the blue eyes, he knew he had stepped wrong. Making light of this didn't seem to set well with Nicolas. What a touchy character he was.

"Seriously, I don't know exactly how old I am. I do think I remember Kish and Ur — other towns in Sumer." Nicolas looked at him blankly. He might be well educated for a Medieval knight, but ancient

history wasn't something usually studied. He knew his Latin and could read and write which was an accomplishment for his generation.

"I never heard of those places," Nicolas said finally, reluctant to admit his ignorance.

"No reason you should. They are dead places now. I'm the only thing left alive that remembers them. I spent some time in Rome at the time of the Caesars, as well. It was there and in Greece that I learned to appreciate clean food, a clean body, and other small pleasures. The Romans did know how to cook."

Methos, finding a ready audience and solid footing with this problem child, spent the rest of the afternoon enthralled Nicolas with his tales of ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt. He had seen them all and survived.



The sun made a slow dip into the horizon as the two very different immortals prepared for their excursion. As soon as the sun had fully retreated, Nicolas made a trip to the chilly stream to bathe and clean his cloak and robe. He returned with a damp body and clothing. He flung the wool cloak over the bush to dry as much as possible.

"I guess one priority should be something a bit warmer and decent," Methos commented, "and having a change of clothes wouldn't go amiss."

"Yes, I suppose. The cold doesn't bother vampires as it does humans. Does it bother you?"

"Of course! We don't catch diseases or anything from the cold, but it's uncomfortable." Methos paused and studied his companion. "There's something to be said for being a vampire."

"I suppose. But not being able to walk in the sun is sometimes more than a simple inconvenience," Nicolas answered shortly, clearly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was going.

Noticing the discomfort, Methos changed the subject. "I suppose it could be. Let's get going. It could be a long walk back to that farmhouse or whatever it was you saw," he said, gathering the sword and using a vine to tie it to his waist.

"Doesn't have to be a walk, you know." Nick grinned at the cringe his comment evoked. His natural sense of humor was reasserting itself.

Throwing the damp cloak over his shoulders and tying the strings, he walked over to Methos and put his arms around him in preparation to levitating. Methos struggled ineffectually against the overwhelming vampiric strength.

"I'd prefer to walk," he gasped as the vampire gripped him firmly and slowly lifted into the air.

"I wouldn't. There won't be much of the night left if we walk."

Methos squirmed then relaxed and began to enjoy the ride. Nicolas swooped over the road and then followed it at treetop level. The close proximity of the trees tended to disconcert Methos. Finally he began to have confidence in the being carrying him and watched the trees move by like a rushing river. Nicolas eventually set them down next to a large copse of trees.

"The cottage is over there," he said, pointing through the trees. Methos couldn't see anything but shadows. He would have to take the vampire's word.

Nicolas stealthily set out through the trees, unerringly finding his way through the underbrush to come out nearly unscathed into a small clearing. He sniffed the air like a bloodhound. "I don't think it's occupied, but there might be something we can salvage." He began walking across the clearing followed by Methos.

Methos was a little surprised at the trust he had in the vampire. Ordinarily he would have been a bit more cautious. Probably it was a result of being tortured in the same dungeon.

While Methos was contemplating the trust that he was giving so willingly, Nicolas had shoved the creaking door open. There were deep layers of dirt on everything in the small one room cottage. The thatch from the roof was drifting down through large gaps in the ceiling. Nicolas brushed the cobwebs away from the fireplace and looked up the chimney.

"This might work. You can be warm tonight."

Methos smiled and looked around the room. There wasn't much to salvage here. There were a few rags on the straw ticks that were moldering nicely in the corner. He didn't want to even think about trying to sleep there. He then noticed that Nicolas had disappeared outside with that disturbing swiftness. He guessed he would get used to it if he knew him long enough.

"Well, we know why it was abandoned," Nicolas

said, coming through the door. "The well is dry. So we'll have to find a creek or something."

Methos nodded and began his own exploration of the interior of the cottage.

"I'll go hunting now. If I can get a deer, I can manage on its blood and you can eat some of the meat."

Methos puttered in and around the cottage, gathering firewood and kindling, then scraping out as much dirt as a makeshift twig broom could manage. Eventually his fire-making skills came back to him, and he had a small bed of coals going in the fireplace when the vampire came back carrying a deer over his shoulder. Nicolas took it outside and butchered it with Methos' sword. He was quick and messy but there wasn't much blood in the carcass.

Methos took his venison steak to the fireplace and holding it with a green-forked branch, he proceeded to sear it on all sides. Nick was stringing up the best parts of the deer to the rafters. Hanging things from rafters took on an entirely new meaning when watching a vampire do it. Then Nicolas disappeared with the offal and the unappetizing parts of the beast.

By the time Nicolas was back in the cabin, Methos was tearing at the stringy meat with his strong white teeth. Nicolas watched for a while without comment then disappeared into the lean-to on the side of the cottage. He reappeared with a large wooden box. He yanked the lid off to reveal reasonably clean blankets and beneath them some ragged, but nearly complete sets of clothing. He found a pair of leggings that were much too big, but he tied them with strips of one of the blankets.

"We'll at least be a bit more comfortable tonight," he commented, digging deeper into the box. He came up triumphantly with a clay water jar. "And I can get you something to drink." Without further ado, he disappeared again. Methos sorted through other items to find a rusty cooking pot with ladle. He began looking around at the few windows in the cottage. He saw that they had shutters so he went outside and began shutting them and propping tree branches against any that had a tendency to sag and might let in sunlight. Since there were only a couple of small windows, it didn't take long.

When he finished that task, he took the deer hide outside and began scraping the bits of flesh and fat from the inside with a flat stone. It was work he hadn't done for a few years. Recently he lived in villages or

monasteries which had servants or lay brothers to do this sort of thing. He hadn't forgotten the skills of several lifetimes, though. Leaning back he looked at his handiwork. It was reasonable. He could tan it if they had the time, but after getting it a bit cleaner, it would do to cover the cracks in the door during the day.

With a whoosh that still startled Methos, Nicolas returned with a slopping jar of water which he took into the newly refurbished cottage. He was cutting it rather close, Methos thought as he brought the deer hide into the house and began wedging it in the cracks around and on the door.

Nicolas nodded and approved of all of the improvements done for his comfort for the coming day. They smiled at each other. Then the coming dawn announced itself with reddish fingers that filtered through the unfinished door. Methos returned to his task and then checked the shutters to see that they were tight. Nicolas was arranging a bed with the blankets on the dirt floor before the fireplace since neither one of them had any thought of two beds or chancing the straw ticking on the small cots against the wall. Methos thought that the straw would serve best in the fireplace if they ran out of the wood he had gathered earlier. It had been a long night and Methos was tired.

They snuggled down in the blankets together and Nicolas began nibbling on Methos' ears and neck. The vampire was well fed this day so perhaps he'd have a measure of control. Methos was certain that he wouldn't as the others' lips and teeth began to weave their web around him.

"Is this how vampires make love?" he whispered in Nicolas' ear while the vampire's tongue and hands continued to explore his body.

"It's all tied up with the blood," Nicolas whispered and bit lightly into Methos' jugular. Methos groaned as the aphrodisiac present in Nicolas' saliva hit his blood stream like a Quickening. Sparks flared behind his closed lids as he vaguely felt a sharp pain then the long, fingered hands were busy with his cock, and he thrust helplessly into the cavern Nicolas had formed with his hands. Before Methos could complete his orgasm, Nicolas pulled away from both his neck and penis. He panted slightly and Methos was certain he was struggling with control. Methos didn't want to die this time; he wanted to be conscious through everything. He'd had a taste of it

when Nicolas bit him a few minutes ago.

Reaching out with his hand, he stroked the vampire's face. "It's okay if you can't stop. I'll survive. I'd just like you to feel completed."

Nicolas nodded and ducked his head beneath the older man's chin resting his face on the thin chest. He noticed in passing that Methos hadn't recovered any weight lost during his incarceration. Perhaps continuing to die wasn't the best thing for him.

Nicolas raised his head, banging the other in the jaw. With his head ringing, Methos drew back. "That's one way to slow me down — pain. I don't get off on pain."

"It wasn't intentional," Nicolas apologized.

"I was joking. There is pain and then there is pain, if you get my meaning."

Nicolas nodded and asked his question, "This dying — does it weaken you a lot?"

"Sometimes — depends on the circumstances. Being tortured to death certainly weakened me. However, I didn't feel especially weakened after we made love in the cave." Methos was certain what was plaguing his guilt-ridden vampire. "And this time, you aren't going to kill me — I get to be awake during it all. You've no excuse. You've just fed on the deer — you don't need me — well, in that way. Yesterday was different. You were weak from the escape, the business in the chapel and then flying us to safety."

"I might be able to do it. Maybe..." his voice trailed off as he began to lick and tease the other's throat. His hands dropped back to the now limp cock of the older immortal. It perked up as Nicolas gently bit into the artery beneath Methos' left ear. Again the aphrodisiac hit his bloodstream, and he writhed in the other's arms. Nicolas bit deeper and groaned himself. He stopped and turned Methos around. Nicolas' cock was rock hard and needed some stimulation. He began stroking it over the other's firm buttocks. He made no effort to penetrate. And he kept his hands busy on Methos' penis while his teeth worried the large vein in the man's neck.

Then Methos exploded in his hands. He clamped down with his elongated canines and thrust hard against the man's back. Shivering in his own form of orgasm, he lost control and began draining the blood from his lover. Methos was limp then felt a weakness stealing over him. He tried to say something or scream, but the onrushing darkness swallowed him.

The morning waned and Methos regained consciousness to struggle to his feet and straighten his clothes. He made himself another seared piece of venison then noticed that Nicolas was rather quiet and subdued. He continued to eat and then went outside to gather more firewood. Bringing in the firewood, he noticed that Nicolas hadn't moved. Deciding to leave the young vampire to brood, he took the sword and went to forage in the forest for the food stuffs that grew there since he was growing tired of an all-meat diet.

Coming back into the cottage late in the afternoon, he decided to jog Nicolas into something. So he went to sit on the floor beside Nicolas.

"What is wrong, my friend?" he questioned quietly. "You're very quiet this afternoon."

Nicolas turned and studied angular features of Methos. "I'm sorry if I've been bad company this afternoon. I've just been thinking we should get out of the area tonight."

"Not happy in our humble abode?"

"Just too close to St. Ignacio's," Nicolas said, rising to his feet and walking around the room obviously restless from his day-long confinement "I'm rather curious as to how you managed to end up in the cellar at St. Ignacio's? You can pass for human easily."

"Actually it had nothing to do with my immortality at first. I was accused of being a witch simply because of the simple doctoring I was doing in the village. I was only using common herbs and cleaning wounds, but it worked far too well to suit some of the locals. After incarceration for a while, my immortality became evident. I healed too fast." Methos' mind wandered briefly to the first time he'd died in questioning. Not wanting to dwell on that, he asked Nicolas, "And how did you manage to be taken? You are quite formidable with your strength and being able to fly."

"Yes, but I'm susceptible to holy objects such as crosses and holy water, as you know." Nicolas then gave a brief summary of the thieves and their accusation.

Their conversations continued through the rest of the afternoon while Methos made himself some venison stew, incorporating the mushrooms, herbs,

and wild onions that he had harvested. Nicolas was completely fascinated at "The Game." He made rude noises regarding the waste of it all. He was also interested in the phenomenon of "The Quickening." In return he explained about his own history and of his part in the Crusades. The afternoon rushed by with the two exchanging history and culture of the two immortal groups.

Methos wondered if the two groups had crossed paths before, but remembered he hadn't found any references in the ancient texts he had been restoring a few years back. But the information might have been so cryptic that he might not have recognized it. Without telling his companion, he made a mental note to try and find out what the Watchers might know about this other immortal species. He deliberately didn't tell Nicolas about the Watchers. He didn't want vampires to know about this secret society that made it their business to watch immortals. After finding out that vampires could read the history of a person through blood exchange, he tried to keep that information far from the forefront of his thoughts.

As full dark approached, Nicolas became more restless.

"I'm going to scout around the area," he finally said, reaching for the tattered cloak.

Methos nodded and sipped at his stew directly from the kettle since it was the only container they had found.

Methos watched the door close and heard the distinctive whoosh of displaced air, meaning that Nicolas had taken to the air. Whatever he had in mind wasn't close.

Methos finished his simple meal then curled up in the discarded blankets by the hearth. He found it easy to drop off to sleep. The past few days had been among the most stressful in his long life. He dozed, waiting for Nicolas to return, then unable to help himself, he slipped deeper into a dream world populated by golden-eyed priests and blond altar boys.



The rattling of harness and an equine snort brought Methos awake and reaching for his sword. Cautiously, he pushed open the sagging door. There were two horses tethered to some nearby trees with

Nicolas loosening the girths of a dark bay. The other horse was still fully tacked with a small pack tied to the back of the saddle.

As Nicolas turned to face Methos, he took a bundle from the back of the saddle of the bay and handed it Methos. Opening the pack, Methos said, "You've had a busy night, haven't you?" The bundle held clean clothing and a blanket.

"I just took a few items that no one seemed to need anymore." It was then that Methos noted the nearly flushed complexion of his ex-cell mate. He was almost horrified at the implications then rethought it. Unconsciously, he caught a small but heavy pouch as it was tossed his way from the vampire. Coins rattled suspiciously from its depths.

"Where exactly did you go?" he questioned in a flat voice.

"Back to St. Ignacio's. The Abbey and church won't need the horses or the money now."

Methos then knew that a vampire's vengeance was a terrible thing. "You murdered them."

"Not all of them," Nicolas said, smiling grimly as he turned back to the bay horse. He slid the bit from its mouth then the headstall back over its ears. Shaking its head, it reached for some blades of grass that it hadn't trampled. "Father Ramirez won't need his gold either." Nick tilted his head toward the pouch Methos held. "And there will be no more witch hunts around here for a while."

Noticing the horrified expression on Methos' face, Nicolas said, "How many times did they murder you, let alone all your suffering? And what did you do to deserve it — only cure a few people of some ills?"

"That's different, I think."

"I don't think so," Nicolas said, walking toward the sorrel standing patiently next to its tree. "It's probably about time we went our separate ways. LaCroix will wonder where I am and might coming looking." Nicolas paused and studied Methos still standing holding the bundle and pouch. "It would be dangerous for LaCroix to find out about you."

Methos could only nod and watch the lithe figure mount his horse. He watched until the horse and rider had disappeared in the trees, not really understanding why Nicolas felt he had to leave him. It was a mystery he probably wasn't going to get an answer to any time soon, if ever. Turning back to the cottage, he began packing the few supplies he had. Nicolas was correct

that the cottage was entirely too close to St. Ignacio's. Relocation was always a problem, but the heavy purse given by the vampire would make it much easier.



Vancouver

"What do you want to drink?" Nick asked as the two entered Nick's house. Nick led the way to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

"You wouldn't happen to have any beer, would you?"

"Yeah, some Coors. Stan, my partner, is fond of it. And I keep some sandwich stuff for him. I don't think the rest of the contents of my fridge would interest you a lot." Nick smiled to himself at the memory of Stan invading his living room on Sundays in the fall for his fix of American Football courtesy of Nick's satellite dish.

Methos smiled wanly at Nick's weak attempt at humor.

"How does it work to be a vampire *and* a cop?" Methos asked, changing the subject as he popped the ring on a can of beer then reaching for the cold cuts and bread. "Do you have any mayonnaise?"

"I work the night shift. And I think there's an unopened jar in the cabinet over the stove."

Methos nodded. "Thanks," he said, opening cabinet doors until he found the jar. "I can see that would be the only way you could manage — working nights."

Walking back into the living room, Methos began examining the artifacts of Nick's life as he nibbled on

the sandwich and sipped his beer. Nick sank down into a chair and watched the other man nervously explore the room. He had patience; he would wait until the other was ready to confide in him.

Methos seemed to be examining everything carefully. In reality, he barely noticed some of the artifacts of 800 years. There were paintings and pottery along with a few photographs. Some of the pictures were fading black and white while others were vivid color. He stopped to study a painting of the sun rising over the Toronto skyline with the CN tower limned in the morning sunrise. Nick studied the man studying the painting.

"So, my friend, have you ever adjusted to your immortality and all it entails?" The question startled Nick with its accuracy into his life.

Nick froze and studied Methos' solemn face. "What exactly do you mean?"

"I knew a few hundred years ago that you were struggling with it. That's why you left so suddenly, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. I felt my master stirring. He didn't need to know of your kind." He paused and said honestly, "No, I have never really adjusted. I've been trying for years to find a cure for my condition."

"So you've kept our secret all these years? What do you think he would have done to me or any Immortal?" Methos read the pain in the vampire's eyes and ignored Nick's last statement.

"Yes, I kept your secret. And I don't know what he would have done but I don't think it would have been pleasant for you. He had this habit of destroying anything that meant anything to me." Nick's face flattened with remembered pain. He effectively cut off the discussion by getting up from the leather chair in which he'd been sitting and walked into the kitchen. He sorted through the freezer, not noticing that he had been followed from the living room. Taking a plastic bag of frozen blood from the compartment, he put it in the microwave and turned the machine on.

"All the mod cons," Methos said, standing in the doorway watching the process. He knew intuitively that Nicolas was suffering from some recent tragedy or loss from the look in his expressive eyes. Understanding because his own loss was raw, Methos had tried to simply make conversation, but he now knew that the mystery of Nick's Master was tied to the unmentioned deep and unabiding sorrow that Methos felt coming

from Nick in waves.

"What did you mean back at the warehouse district when you asked me if I was O'Leary's 'Watcher?'"

Before answering, Methos walked to the trash, deposited his empty can, and reached into the refrigerator for another then discarded the remnants of his sandwich which had suddenly become tasteless sawdust.

"There's a group of mortals that watch and record the lives of Immortals. I thought for a moment that you might be the Watcher assigned to O'Leary now. I thought Kelly was dead. He disappeared after *Paris*." Methos' voice put the emphasis on the French city.

As the bell dinged on the microwave, Nick took out his meal and poured it into a heavy mug. Then the two walked back into the dimly lit living room. Nick went from window to window closing shades and shutters since sunrise was near while he drank slowly from the heavy cup. He did not have an automated shutter system in this house, no outside tv monitors to watch the forbidden sunrise, no selection of remotes to control everything — no *High Tech Dungeon of Doom*.

Nick studied his companion who was steadily drinking his second beer. In the growing predawn light, he noticed the thin face was drawn and wan. Methos looked worse in the daylight than he had in the moonlight. There was a lot more to this than Methos was telling him. He might not have seen the man for centuries, but he could see he was a shadow of the man he had known. He wasn't sure Methos had looked quite this bad even back in the dungeon.

Deciding to drop any questions for the moment, Nick finished his dinner and cleaned the cup. He tinkered in the kitchen for a few more minutes and watched his companion finish the beer.

"The spare bedroom is down the hall. There are clean towels in the bathroom. Make yourself at home."

"I'm not putting you out or anything? I can find a hotel or start back to Seattle."

"No, you're not putting me out — and I think you need to rest." Nick finished up the few dishes. "I sleep in the basement. It's safer."

Nodding in sudden understanding, Methos rose from the chair where he'd been slouching. He recovered a small bag from near the front door.

"See you this evening."

"Get some rest."

"Sure."

After turning off the few lights and checking the dead bolts on the doors, Nick went down to his lair in the basement. Cleaning up briskly and rechecking shutters over the few windows, Nick relaxed on the wide bed with his black silk sheets. He still indulged himself in many creature comforts. Quickly he slid off into the half-world of vampire sleep. He slept but not as humans or even animals. It was a form of rest usually imposed simply by the rising of the sun. As he became older, the sun had less control of him, allowing him to roam during the day within doors or even outside with a lot of sun block and a lot of clothes. It wasn't the easiest way to manage, but it beat dropping into hibernation every time the sun rose which is what he had done for many years after his change.

At first he thought it was the wind but after waking more thoroughly, he knew it was coming from upstairs. Nick listened and heard the sound again. There was a bang and clatter as unidentified items in his living room fell. Reaching for his holster hanging on the closet door, he pulled out his handgun and slipped up the stairs. He worried that another of Methos' enemies had found him.

Rushing headlong through the basement door, he was depending on his vampiric sight and hearing to alert him to the invaders. He barely missed being skewered on a glittering sword that struck out of the darkness. Only his enhanced speed saved him. Obviously the swordsman didn't realize what he was fighting. He turned and would have fired, but it was Methos, disheveled and panting, starting to swing again. The sword flashed toward Nick. Once more his remarkable abilities saved him from a thrust that would have opened a human from breastbone to navel. Methos circled him, holding the sword in both hands. His short-cropped hair was plastered to his head, and he looked a bit incongruous dressed only in boxer shorts. Nick wasn't much better, having thrown on only his black silk bathrobe.

The Immortal raised the sword back over his head for another strike, a killing strike for both Immortals and vampires. Nick ducked, dropped his gun, and raised his hands, stopping the blade mid-swing. He forced the other man back against the leather sofa that somehow had been spared the battle with a probable

will-o-the-wisp since Nick didn't sense any other presence but Methos.

"Methos!" Nick finally shouted, trying to get the other man's attention. "Damn it, it's me, Nick, Nick Knight or Nicolas de Brabant, if you prefer." His iron-like grip tightened on the pommel of the sword, and he yanked it out of the other's hands.

Slowly Nick lowered the sword then tossed it into the adjoining kitchen. He hunted around and found the Glock which he held loosely, but alertly in his hand and waited.

Methos shook his head. "What happened? I dreamed. I dreamed I was O'Leary and was fighting Duncan. I saw him shot, then I took his head." He stopped and looked around the living room. "Guess it wasn't just a dream. I must...must have acted it out. Nick, I'm sorry." Both men began looking around the room. It looked as if it had been invaded and pillaged by the Saladin's Army. Fragile glass ornaments were shattered. Paintings were slashed and chairs turned over.

"What is it with you?" Nick asked, straightening the few book shelves that had been spared, eying his companion and keeping the gun ready.

"A dream?" Methos muttered as he fiddled with a broken vase.

"It must have been one hell of a dream! That's all I can say!" Nick snarled, taking a shredded work in progress to the trash can in the kitchen.

"As I said, I was fighting Mac as O'Leary."

"I have no idea how these *'Quickenings'* of yours works, but I think you'd better tell me the whole story. I've figured bits and pieces out of it from what you've let drop and what Kelly said. But I do think you owe me." Nick waved at the wrecked room.

Ducking his head, Methos only nodded then turned for the kitchen.

Worrying because he'd tossed the sword in there, Nick followed and watched as Methos searched his refrigerator for a beer. Popping the tab on the silver can, Methos didn't even notice the sword and walked back to the living room.

"I suppose you do."

"Yes," Nick answered shortly, beginning to put chairs and end tables to rights. Some of the glass broken in the photo's frames but luckily the photographs themselves were undamaged. Quietly Methos retrieved the broom from pantry and began

sweeping up the debris of his ghost battle.

Adrenalin levels began to return to normal as Methos dumped the last dustpan full of glass in the trash. He went back into the bedroom and came back clad in a ragged pair of tight jeans to the aroma of freshly perked coffee.

"You don't drink this stuff?" he said, pouring the black steaming liquid in a cup.

"No, but strangely I really like the smell of it. It's wonderful when it's fresh. But there's nothing worse than the smell of the stale stuff you find around police stations. Sometimes I just perk some and enjoy the fumes." Nick smiled and gestured to the now normal living room. He had taken a wine bottle out of the fridge and was drinking directly from it.

As they sat down on the black leather furniture, Nick said, "Now you can tell me the whole story — from the beginning."

Taking a deep breath, Methos began, "I met Duncan MacLeod a couple of years ago. I was doing research for the Watchers in Paris at the time."

"Working for this Watcher organization? Doing what? Watching yourself?"

"Well, almost. Methos is almost a myth with the organization, and over the years I've found the Watchers have been a good place to become anonymous." Methos smiled at the memory of Duncan coming into his home, unsheathing his katana with Methos sitting on the floor not challenging. Then it dawned on Duncan that here was the object of his quest.

"Anyhow, Duncan and I became friends. I spent time here with him on the West Coast and with him when he was in France. Then a few months ago, there was nearly a war between the Watchers and the Immortals. It's too long a story to tell and the only thing that's relevant is that I was caught in the middle which left hard feelings between Duncan and me. I miscalculated and a friend of Duncan's was killed by the Watchers. Duncan wasn't quite ready to forgive me for Jacob's death. So I made myself scarce for a while. I hoped that later we'd be able to talk it out and settle it between us."

Nick murmured a soft acknowledgment of the statements.

"So I wasn't seeing anything much of Duncan when this O'Leary character must have come to town. And you know what happened then."

"Were you lovers with this Duncan MacLeod?"

"Not yet. Maybe never. Duncan was a raging straight. But he might have been open to extreme possibilities, ya never know."

"So you weren't there when Duncan needed you to be? You feel guilty about that and about the earlier problem between the Watchers and Immortals?"

"That's about the sum of it."

"So now you've tracked this O'Leary down and revenged your friend?"

"Yes."

"So what brought on this tonight?"

"I don't know. It might be a form of a '*Dark Quicken*ing.'"

"'*Dark Quicken*ing?'"

"That's where the personality of the man or woman beheaded takes over their killer. Normally these are really nasty people — ancient nasty people. I've seen it a couple of times — once with Duncan. I didn't think O'Leary was so old that I couldn't contain him." Methos' voice broke. "Damn it, Nick! Mac was among the best of us, as I said. He shouldn't have died that way."

"No, it doesn't sound as if he should have, but the world isn't fair and never has been. You should know that."

"Well, of course, I understand all the platitudes, and if you're going to quote them to me — don't."

"Okay, I won't."

"This coffee is great, but I think I want to get stinking drunk. Where's the rest of the beer?"

"I think you've cleaned out Stan's supply."

"Which way's the nearest bar?" Methos said, heading back toward the bedroom to finish dressing.

Nick followed him. "I don't think that's the greatest idea. What if one of these fits hits you again while you're out in public?"

"I guess you can come as my keeper," Methos answered, pulling on his shirt and feeling around on the floor for his shoes and socks.

"I have a better idea," Nick said, as the peaceful shores of Vancouver Island flared in his mind. "I know of this island that we can rent. It has a cabin with all the mod cons, as you say, but it's the only cabin on the island. I've got a couple weeks leave. I was planning on going up there anyway. It's the off season so I'm fairly sure I can rent it." Nick studied the man who had

paused putting on his second shoe. "You can get as drunk as you like. You can destroy all the furniture since I'm in the process of buying it as soon as the lawyers get it all straightened out."

Leaning negligently back against the headboard of the bed, Methos contemplated the offer. It really had more appeal than a dark, smoky bar.

"Okay, make the call and see if it's available. It's better than the alternative, I guess. And I really don't want to go back to Seattle to help Joe settle Duncan's American estate. Richie and Amanda can help him."

The ferry rocked gently on mild swells as it left Campbell River. Leaving the Mercedes, the two men drifted toward the bow of the small craft. It wouldn't take long to reach the island where they'd leave the Merc and rent a boat to take them to the smaller island farther north. The last ferry of the day out of Campbell River wasn't crowded this time of year. The weather was only misty with promise of rain later that night.

Nick had packed the necessities for the cabin, made arrangements for the island cabin and boat while Methos gathered the groceries and beer. Shortly after the sun sank over the horizon, Nick picked him up at the car rental agency where he returned his car. They had made good time up the island and managed to catch the last ferry off Vancouver Island.

"What's the story with you? You've been looking like a whipped dog every time you don't think I'm looking at you."

"Another long story," Nick answered, staring off into the darkness. He rubbed the railing as though polishing it.

"We've got the time now," Methos hinted gently.

"I suppose." Nick smiled thinly, rubbing the railing harder. "There was this woman...."

"Isn't there always?"

"And then there was my partner." Nick turned away to lean against the railing and not look at Methos.

"Dead?"

"It all fell apart one night in Toronto. I had been working there as a cop for a few years. The Medical Examiner, Natalie, knew my secret." Nick smiled at the memory of waking in the morgue. "She was working to see if she could cure my disease. She hadn't made much

progress." Nick laughed and said, "Would you believe that Vampirism is just another virus, but so far an incurable one? Just another version of AIDS, we were beginning to think. Isn't that a laugh? Something as old and feared as vampirism, simply a virus that's somehow related to the latest scourge of mankind. Nothing supernatural about vampires at all, according to Nat — nothing innately evil at all or so she thought."

"And how did it fall apart?" Methos directed the conversation back to the point.

"It started in a shoot-out at the precinct. I didn't realize my young partner was behind me when I confronted the suspect. I didn't protect her and the perp shot her. I went so far as to consider bringing her across that night at the hospital. Natalie resented that. We'd been dancing around a relationship for three or four years. I couldn't trust myself not to kill her." Nick stared at his feet and continued in a monotone. "She confronted me after Tracy died. Either make love to her or she was leaving — She was so sure we could find a way to be together. She had an idea that this might cure me. It's a long complicated thing, but it might have worked except for me.

"A friend of hers had suicided and I wonder now if that prompted her to push me. Anyhow, I lost control and killed her, but I couldn't bring myself to bring her across. I asked LaCroix to stake me, put me out of my misery. He refused — told me to walk in the sun and not involve him. By the time the sun rose the next morning, I had remembered a vow I had made to try and do penance on this earth to make up for all the evil in my past. I knew I wouldn't be allowed to be with Natalie until I had saved my soul." Nick looked Methos in the eye. "Now you have it all."

Methos didn't really know what to say. He couldn't completely blame Nick even though he really didn't approve of him trying to make love with his girl if his control wasn't up to it, but then women sometimes pushed and pushed until you gave them what they wanted. "Why didn't you bring her across?"

"I just couldn't doom her to this half-life. And I've made the mistake of bringing people across who didn't know what they were getting into and hated me for it. Hell, I'm a prime example of someone being brought across and hating their maker because they didn't completely understand the price to be paid for this form of immortality. I couldn't have stood it if Natalie had hated me. She may have thought she knew what she was getting into, but I never could explain about *the*

hunger and all it entails. She would have suicided the first time she lost control and killed a mortal. She had too much compassion and real humanity to survive as a *killer*."

"So you made this decision for her. You let her die." Methos was condemning Nick no more than he condemned himself for not being there for Duncan or any of the others in his past.

"Yes, then to top it all off, LaCroix has abandoned me. He thought the decision not to bring Natalie across so disgusting that he has broken the link between us. He's never done that before. So you can't be any more disgusted with the situation than I or LaCroix." There was a hint of sorrow at the loss of this contact with his master in Nick's voice as he walked back toward the rear of the ferry. Methos stood by himself in the bow.

The boat lurched and scraped as it pulled into the pier unnoticed by both men. This revelation by Nick was troubling Methos. He wondered if the young vampire had changed so much. No, he'd made a mistake and was paying for it with his own form of penance, as he said. Methos remembered the type of Christianity that Nick had to have been raised under. Penance was important to the Medieval Christian. So he'd let Nick do his penance as he saw fit. It was really none of his business.

The two made their way to the Mercedes and waited their turn to drive down the ramp. There was an uncomfortable silence between them. Methos rather wished he hadn't pushed Nick into his confession. But it cleared the air for him to a degree. He now understood Nick's long silences and introspective inattention that had puzzled him earlier.

"The boat rental place is a couple of blocks over. I made sure they'd wait if we got here late," Nick said in a neutral tone of voice.

Once at the boat rental, Nick pounded on the door and a balding man with a large belly opened the door and rubbed his eyes. "You the guy that called from Vancouver and wants to rent a boat for a couple of weeks?"

"Yes. Is it ready?"

"Yeah, it's moored over there," the man said, pointing off in the darkness. "Lemme get my shoes on, and I'll show it to you."

"Okay," Nick said as the door swung shut. He looked over at the Mercedes. Methos had most of the gear out on the sidewalk beside the car. He went over

to help remove the sleeping bags and the case of Coors.

The door of the rental office opened and the owner shuffled out in his bedroom slippers. "This the car ya want to leave in the lot?"

"Yes," Nick answered, thinking the question was rather redundant.

Methos and Nick followed the boat owner down to the pier and inspected the boat. It seemed perfectly seaworthy.

"Sure ya wanna go out in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, we're sure."

"Don't know if I should let ya. Where are ya goin'?"

"We're going to Doe Island — a couple miles up the channel."

"Yes, well, I guess you can't miss it."

"I have rather good night vision and have been there quite a few times."

"Okay, here's the keys to the boat, and I'll need the keys to your car so I can move it if I need to."

Nick took the keys to the boat and handed over the keys to the Merc. It didn't bother him to leave this car in a lot as it would have the Caddy. There was no sentimental value to the Mercedes. It was a serviceable car, but no memories resided in it.

Once the boat was loaded and the paperwork attendant with renting the boat completed, they moved slowly out of the harbor and turned north in the channel. Nick navigated with ease through the buoys and let the boat slowly move against the current. There wasn't any moon, but he could clearly see the shore of Vancouver Island and various other islands in the passage.

It only took an hour to reach the small wharf that serviced the small island and cabin on it. They quickly off loaded the boat and made their way through the tall pines that populated the island. In ten minutes they were out of sight of the water and making their way on a narrow trail. Topping a rise, Nick pointed out the freshwater stream that was spring fed up in the hills. The peace was shattering here.

Once at the cabin, they had to do all the housekeeping chores such as starting the gasoline generator for electricity for lights and to run the pump in the well. It took a while but they didn't rush. The island seemed to demand that the pace slow down from the city.

Nick was just finishing off making sure the last shutter was in place in the bedroom when he heard the slither of a sword. He turned and the long blade pierced his abdomen to excruciating pain. In slow motion, he saw the gloating face of Methos as his world began to go red. There was a glint to the hazel eyes that he had seen back at the house. The sword was shoved deeper and the thrust pushed him to the floor.

Methos stood over him holding the sword which had by now exited through his back and was firmly seated in the wood flooring. He vaguely heard a laugh then the comment. "You're a pretty thing. Almost as pretty as Michael. Since he's not available, I'll have to make do with you."

Nick was grasping the blade of the sword, but he was making no progress at removing it. His hands were becoming slick with his own blood, both from the wound in his stomach and from his hands clutching the razor edge of the blade. Then it was yanked away from his hands and out of his body to more pain. In moments his blood was streaming back into his body, but he was weak. He hadn't bothered to feed before they left the house, and now he was paying for it.

"I could take your head. It kills your kind the same as mine, doesn't it?"

Nick could make no answer. The sword point was at his throat. He made no move to upset the being that had overshadowed Methos. Somehow he had to get Methos to put a stop to this before it was too late. The edge sawed gently at his neck. Instinctively, he tried to draw away from it.

"Get up slowly or I'll take your head before you can move," the Immortal said. "Get up nice and slow."

Nick complied, wondering if he could move fast enough in his weakened condition to take the sword. He had to play for time to allow his system to heal.

"Undress. I want to see what kind of a package I have here." Methos moved behind Nick, holding the blade keen edge at Nick's throat. O'Leary pulled the blade in until Nick could feel his blood trickle down his neck to the collar of his shirt.

His hands were still clasped at his stomach. The blood had receded and his hands were nearly healed. But he couldn't make any move that might send the sword deeper into his throat; he was so vulnerable at that spot just over the sluggishly throbbing blood vessels.

He raised his hands to his shirt and unbuttoned it.

O'Leary allowed him to shrug out of it even as he put the sword in a few centimeters deeper. Nick wore no undershirt so his hands moved to his belt. It came loose easily. Then he dropped his trousers. His shorts followed. All puddled around his feet. He hadn't taken his shoes off as he couldn't bend over without driving the sword into his throat. He shivered as O'Leary ran a free hand down his back to his buttocks then pinched.

"Not too bad. I've had better asses, but this one will do in a pinch." O'Leary laughed at his own joke. Then matched the actions to words again. Nick could ignore these indignities. Pinches were not even mosquito bites to him.

"Don't do this, Methos."

"Methos isn't here right now. He's so upset over his dear Duncan that it was easy to take over this time. I think I can fuck you and still keep this blade at your throat, don't you? Methos remembers that you like to bite. Well, I can't let you do that, now can I? But it might be fun sometime."

Nick was shoved in a shuffle toward the bed with the long blade still holding him in thrall. "I understand you don't like holy things. I might be able to find a cross or two for your amusement later, but right now, I just need a good fuck."

"Let me get my shoes off. Move the blade away so I can bend over," Nick said as he tripped and the edge went deeper.

"Not on your life, pretty boy. Not on your life." The sword embedded itself more firmly in his flesh. The blood continued to trickle down his neck and on to his chest. "Bend over, boy." The sword loosen infinitesimally.

Nick leaned forward and rested his hands on the thin, bare mattress. The Immortal was roughly humping his back then the cock found the tight passage. Nick grunted as he was roughly impaled. O'Leary began to shove in and out without any consideration of the man beneath him. Nick endured. He'd endured worse, and he was more worried that he'd lose his head when this was all over.

As O'Leary neared orgasm, Nick could feel the Immortal's grip on the blade loosen. At that moment, Nick made his move. He pushed back against his attacker to a satisfied groan from O'Leary. Then he twisted around pulling the still hard, pulsing cock from his body. With one hand, he grabbed the sword and hurled it across the room where it clattered hollowly

against the wall. While the weapon was still in the air, he lunged and had the Immortal down on the floor in a space of a split second. Without even thinking, his fangs drove into the soft human flesh. He drank and read all the anguish of the trapped Methos. Then he lived the beheading of the dark Scot. Eventually he began to see the memories of Methos. Happy times on a barge anchored on the Seine over looked by the towering cathedral of Notre Dame. He saw many faces — one of a lovely young woman who was briefly, but greatly loved.

He continued to feed until the body beneath him quit struggling and the heart finally fluttered and stopped. He pulled back. As he had been taking the blood, he had this thought that if he could take all the evil of O'Leary into himself with the blood, perhaps O'Leary would no longer trouble Methos. He had never lost control. He had killed deliberately. There was no joy in this killing — actually he hadn't felt any killing lust. It had been a cold-blooded murder. A murder, he hoped, of the spirit of O'Leary.

Nick started to rise and tripped over the ripped trousers, of which remnants still hobbled his ankles. He reached down and pulled the rags off his feet. He tossed them in the corner and slid off his shoes. His bags were at the foot of the bed. He sorted through and found another pair of pants and put them on without worrying about underwear. He kept a wary eye on the body on the floor, but so far the Immortal hadn't stirred.

Nick went downstairs and searched for his handcuffs, which had been put away with his gun and ammunition in a cabinet by the fireplace. Then he retrieved some beer from the cooler that hadn't been emptied into the fridge just yet. He figured when Methos — if it was Methos — revived, he'd want a drink. But until he was sure it was Methos who woke up, he wasn't taking any chances.

Back up in the bedroom, he carried the Immortal to the bed and handcuffed him to the sturdy iron bed frame. Nick looked at his hands and felt his abdomen. Everything was healed, he decided, as he ran his hands over his throat. There wasn't even any blood to show. It had all returned to his body. But he still felt dirty and used. He wondered if the water was hot yet. Then he didn't care. All he wanted was a shower. In a strange manner, he was the victim of rape at his age and experience. Unlike most rape victims, however, he'd had the satisfaction of killing his attacker. He just hoped he'd killed him forever.

Nick put the beer on the bedside table where Methos could reach it if he woke up. Then he took his shaving kit and went down the hall to the small utilitarian bathroom. He turned on the shower. It was only luke-warm. He didn't care — all he wanted was a shower.

Stepping out of the now icy shower, Nick dried himself off and looked in the mirror. Not even a scar to show for his adventure. Any scars were all in his head. It would be a long time before he forgot the long wicked blade at his throat. A long, long time. The rape paled before the vulnerability he had felt with the sword at his throat. Beheading was one of the three ways to truly kill his kind.

He heard the rattle of the handcuffs from the bedroom. He stopped his razor because he was reluctant to confront whoever had woken in his bed. Carefully he shaved his cheeks then his tender throat in the cold water. Rinsing the residual soap from his face, he looked again at his countenance. Nothing different.

Walking slowly back to the bedroom, he wondered what to say to Methos — if indeed it was Methos. Deciding to play it by ear, he eased into the room. The Immortal there was slowly sipping the beer he'd left.

"Methos?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"Yes."

Fumbling at his jacket hanging on a chair beside the door, he found the handcuff key.

"Can I take those things off you now?"

"I think so," Methos said softly. "He caught me unawares. I didn't feel him at all this time until he was in control." Methos turned his head away. "Nick. Nick, I'm sorry. It shouldn't have happened."

"It did and I survived. We won't be so unprepared again. I'm putting this sword somewhere hard to get to now. If another Immortal should happen to appear on this island, I'll be able to take him out for you."

"You're right. Put it away. Don't tell me where."

Nick released Methos and took the sword away. With vampiric speed, he took it out to the boat, and stored it in one of the storage spaces under a bench. The salt air might be hard on the metal, but at this point he didn't care.

Once back in the cabin, he noticed Methos had taken a cold shower too. He was drying his hair as he walked around the kitchen putting foodstuffs away.

"I hope you put it somewhere very inconvenient."

"I did."

"Nick, I...I really don't know what to say."

"Say nothing about the business upstairs except possibly to tell me that O'Leary is gone. I had a thought that maybe if I drained your blood, I might take most of him away from you."

"God, I hope so." Methos' voice was low but fervent. "If you want more, it's all yours. All of it."

Drawn out of his own misery by Methos' self-dispair and disgust, Nick said, "That must have been hideous. Having O'Leary take over." He had a sudden realization. "Like *the hunger* that lives inside me."

Methos looked up uncertainly. "Not something I would choose."

"Nor I," Nick murmured softly with understanding. "But wouldn't it be ironic if the evil in me was what destroyed the evil in you?"

"Nicolas de Brabant, there is nothing of evil in you." They exchanged a long silent look.

The moment was broken as a gentle breeze disturbed a branch which cracked against an open window. It was then that Nick noticed at the sun was lapping at the horizon. He then began his daily ritual of closing all the curtains and checking the shutters.

"I think I'll get some rest," Nick said and began walking up the stairs to his bedroom, grabbing one of the sleeping bags on his way.

Methos stood and watched him go. Nick didn't want to talk about the rape, and there was nothing he could do to make him. He just hoped that O'Leary didn't put in his appearance again or if he did that Methos could contain him. He'd never experienced a *Dark Quickenings*. He'd helped Duncan through his, but this was different. There wasn't a holy spring he knew of in the area. He'd just have to get over it the best he could. Maybe there was something to Nick's idea of draining his blood and killing him. He hadn't tried killing Duncan and draining the blood. But perhaps having a vampire do it might be the key. Damn, he still wasn't used to Duncan being gone.

Eventually Methos sought his own bed. He listened for any sounds from the connecting room, but it was quiet. He wondered if vampires had nightmares. If they

did, Nick should have a few this day.



That evening as the sun dropped behind the hill to the west, Nick ambled downstairs to find Methos reading on the futon in the living room. "Have a quiet day?"

Methos knew that Nick was referring to any reappearance of O'Leary. "Yes, very quiet. I slept some and put more gas in the generator."

Nick nodded and wandered to the kitchen and found that Methos had put his wine bottles in the fridge. He'd completely forgotten them this morning. He pulled the cork on one and dumped some of the contents in a mug and went back to the living room. He wasn't especially hungry, but just as well to keep up his strength in case O'Leary overtook Methos again.

The evening was spent in companionable silence as each man examined his conscience and memories.

"How about a walk?" Nick asked as he went to the cupboard over the credenza. He pulled out his shoulder harness and slid the Glock into it.

"Fine. It's quit raining now. Rained all morning, ya know."

"Yes, I noticed. But it seems to have cleared nicely." Nick was opening the shades and looking into the night.

The small talk wasn't exactly uncomfortable, but it didn't have a genuine ease to it either. Methos grabbed his coat as they went out the door. The gentle rain had left a chill on the air. Nick led the way up a path behind the A-frame. A glint of moonlight was visible through the thinning clouds to light the way for Methos. Moving quietly, they stopped occasionally to listen to the wild night sounds. An owl hooted in the distance. There was a scrabbling sound in the brush at the side of the trail signifying some small animal fleeing the invaders. Walking was working the kinks out of his neck, Methos decided.

The path got steeper and they stopped frequently just to enjoy the quiet that really wasn't all that quiet if you listened. Once more the owl hooted mournfully. Finally the crest of the hill was reached. The beginnings of the small stream trickled down between moss-covered rocks. It was a lovely peaceful spot. Methos sank down on another moss-covered rock. He leaned his lanky frame back against a tree trunk. Nick stood up

higher on the absolute top of the hill and surveyed the landscape that only he could see at night. His vision allowed him to see the owl as it found its dinner, diving on an unsuspecting mouse in a glen between this hill and the next.

He felt rather than saw Methos move up behind him. He felt the warm breath on the back of his neck. Two hands rested on his shoulders. He stiffened, but there was no threat in those hands. Then soft lips toyed with downy hair on the back of his neck. He smiled as he remembered he hadn't gotten the haircut he'd intended this week. Methos ran his hands down Nick's arms so Nick leaned back against the taller man.

"I may not be your Natalie and you may not be Duncan, but we can enjoy each other," Methos whispered.

Nick nodded. "No swords at my neck, please."

"No, no swords."

Nick twisted in the Immortal's arms and raised his head for a soft kiss that was waiting for him. Methos pulled the strong body closer to him.

"Do you want to go back to the cabin or just let nature take its course here?"

"I vote for nature."

"So do I."

Nick carefully hung his shoulder holster over a handy branch then turned to Methos. Slowly, almost reverently, they undressed each other. They used Methos' long coat for bed over a mattress of pine needles. Under the tall conifers, the ground was nearly dry so there wasn't any discomfort from the rain earlier that day.

"Not too cold for you?" Nick asked as he leaned over the reclining body of the Immortal.

"I think you can warm me up nicely. And O'Leary was right, you are pretty. Much prettier than I remember. Must have something to do with the existence we had been leading when we met."

Nick smiled at the gentle reference to the dark days in Spain long centuries ago. He was very glad that he had met this man even in those circumstances. Methos was someone worth knowing and now worth loving.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to the other man's. His tongue slid out and demanded entrance. Methos readily acquiesced. Their tongues dueled for a few moments then Methos ran his tongue over the slowly lengthening fangs. Nick shuttered. His vampire teeth were one of his most erotic areas. Somehow,

Methos understood and lapped at the canines and encouraged them to grow. Nick growled and thrashed as Methos continued his assault on Nick's mouth.

Nick shifted his body so he could reach between them to lightly run his fingers up and down the rampant cock of his lover. He teased the opening at the top of the long organ. Pulling back, he settled on his side to lick and prepare the neck offered to him so generously.

"Don't hold anything back, Nick," Methos panted.

"Nothing," Nick agreed.

Time collapsed and reformed itself as Nick pleased the man beside him. He stroked then finally shifted so he could lick and suck Methos' penis. He carefully retracted his fangs and was amazed that he was able to do this. Then his own lust overtook him, and he lunged for the throbbing veins that pulsed in the Immortal's neck. He threw himself over the recumbent body which was thrusting upward helplessly. He drank the sweet blood which brought his own cock erect. Then both bodies were rubbing and writhing against each other until they came at nearly the same moment. Nick pulled back and saw that Methos' eyes were open. Green eyes gleamed in the moonlight. Somehow, the moon had come out between the clouds to give a brightness to the scene.

Nick was startled that his lover lived. He thought about the images that came in the blood this time. There was no hint of O'Leary. He relaxed. He hoped O'Leary was banished for good. He relaxed on the makeshift bed and studied the branches of the tree overhead.

Methos groaned and then snuggled closer finally, shivering. "It's bloody cold now. Where are my clothes?" He began searching around in the dark, snagging bits and pieces of clothing. He didn't care whose he put on; he just started slipping into what was available. Nick watched in amusement with a slight grin on his face. It was one of the first natural, unforced smiles that he'd had in a long time.

"You aren't much good as a furnace, you know. Your body temperature must be just above freezing," Methos continued to grumble as he put on Nick's shirt. He tried to slide a foot into a shoe that was simply too short. "Where are *my* shoes?"

"Are you always so grouchy after love making? Remind me to kill you the next time so I don't have to put up with all this complaining."

"Well, you're not much help. I can't see a bloody thing in the dark, and I know you can see as well as if it were daylight." Methos was stifling laughter as he continued, "Find *my* shoes, if you please." He reclined back on the ground and waited expectantly.

"Yes, my lord and master," Nick said, unerringly reaching for the shoes that were only inches from the top of the Immortal's head for some unknown reason.

Methos stood up after putting on the errant shoes. Nick almost giggled as he put on what was left of the clothing. The shirt was too small so he just threw it over his arm to carry. It was too much trouble to put on socks so he slipped his feet into his shoes without them.

The two walked quietly back down the hill to the cabin, enjoying once more the night sounds of the wilderness. Nick paused and nudged his companion then he pointed to a deer standing only a few feet off the trail. She was close enough so that even Methos could see her. Both men stopped breathing while the doe stared at them. Then as suddenly as she had appeared, she was gone.

"Beautiful. I understand why you're going to buy this place," the Immortal whispered. It seemed almost sacrilegious to talk out loud this night.



The next two weeks passed with startling swiftness. Both men were relieved when O'Leary made no further appearances. Both were pleased with Nick's unorthodox cure for a *Dark Quickening*.

They had spent their vacation hiking and making love. Nick thought he'd never been happier. But he knew this idyllic existence couldn't continue. There had to be a fly in the ointment.

They were packing on the last day of vacation when Methos let the other shoe drop.

"I've got to go back to Seattle."

"You can't stay in Vancouver?"

"No, I need to settle some loose ends and go back to my job in Paris. I enjoy the research, the learning."

"I understand, I think," Nick said.

"I'll be back quite often, you know. And you can afford to vacation in Paris, can't you?"

Smiling, Nick nodded. It would work out. He wouldn't leave his job with the police force, and

Methos didn't want to leave his research work with the Watchers.

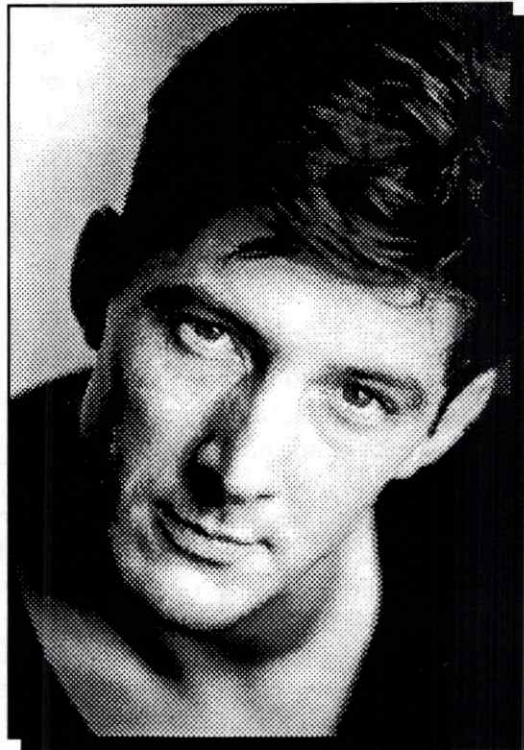
They contentedly retraced their steps back to Vancouver. Once back in the city, Methos rented a car on the way over to Nick's place. Nick found it disconcerting to return to the house, he'd never been very happy in to discover that he was satisfied, almost happy, with his life at the moment. One more night then Methos would leave the next day for Seattle.

"You know, I think I'll bring Joe up here sometime. I think you two would enjoy one another." Then realizing the double entendre, Methos added, "Intellectually — just intellectually. Not that Joe isn't a delectable mortal. But I don't want you trying out your new skills on mortals just yet."

"Jealous?" Nick enquired sardonically, but secretly amused.

"You bloody know it."

Nick smiled — a real smile. He had been doing a lot of that lately. He might even get used to it.



The End

Reclamation

by
- Natasha Barry -

Based on the episode Ashes to Ashes

When Nick returned to the loft, he was anticipating his master's arrival. The invitation he'd extended wouldn't have been as obvious to most people, but the relationship between Nick and LaCroix contained subtleties others never could aspire to. It was part of their lifestyle, this way they had of speaking in loose patterns while being immediately understood; of being distant while remaining inside each other.

They needed to speak while recent emotions were still fresh in their minds, to be experienced and relived: To be killed, if necessary.

It had surprised Nick, witnessing his master's vulnerability. He'd never seen LaCroix so complacent. It was frightening to him. How could this most resilient individual be so resigned to destruction at the hands of someone he'd once cared for, but obviously now despised?

Nick couldn't let it stand, unexplained, unexplored, and LaCroix—knowing Nick as no one else ever had—would realize this.

There was a slight movement in the air, and Nick turned to find his master before him. "I'm glad you came," he stated very politely, but gently, lest his correctness be misunderstood.

"I nearly didn't." LaCroix smiled to take the heat out of his words. "That would have surprised you."

It was acknowledged between them: **LaCroix had never not come when Nick requested it.**

Nick said only, "Are you hungry?"

LaCroix was sly. "I can always use a glass."

Nick returned with a bottle and two glasses. "This isn't the best vintage."

"I know. I should have brought a bottle from the club. But, I came directly here." Accepting the glass, he glanced around. "I can see you had a caller earlier."

"Yes, this is where Divia found me. I think she

knew of me when she followed Urs."

LaCroix sighed at mention of the young blond. She'd been a performer at RAVEN. "She was so very lovely."

"And talented," Nick put in. He hadn't found her very bright, and had little use for her, himself.

"In his own way, I think Vachon quite adored her. She was the only child he bothered to keep track of. I think she would have been quite helpless without him. In a way, perhaps it's best they went together. And your Tracy, Vachon's lover, you want me to rearrange the facts?"

Nick shook his head, taking a seat to convey a more casual atmosphere. "I don't think they were lovers. Not physically. But they definitely had a romance."

"Rather like you and Dr. Lambert."

Nick admitted it. "Somewhat. When I told Natalie about Divia, she knew Vachon had died, and that made her very concerned for me." That was telling the truth, without going into it too far.

LaCroix did take the hint, and sat on the couch, since Nick had taken the chair.

They both felt the sun rising, and Nick reached for the remote which would activate the steel shutters to block out the sun. Fortunately, he'd already had a light on in the loft, and the skylight always let natural light into the center of the room.

"I should have been concerned about you," LaCroix admitted, remembering his shock when Divia had informed him she'd killed his son, his favorite, his Nicolas. "I knew you should have been included as one of her targets, but I couldn't conceive of anyone actually destroying you. I was shielding from her, too much, I can see that now, lest her evil infect me." There was more to it: He hadn't wanted to experience the approach of his own death.

"I wondered why you didn't sense her."

Self-deprecatingly, LaCroix confessed, "I didn't want to. I knew we would be face-to-face soon, and it turned out to be sooner than I thought. I just never allowed myself to think she would actually come after you."

Gazing past his father's face, Nick recollected that scene hours earlier, when he'd come home to find his father's nemesis waiting for him. He knew she'd sworn to leave her human father, her vampire son, alone, separated by death by all those he cared for, and Nick had known as well as Natalie his own demise would have to be the cruelest blow of all. "You had told me who and what she was. I truly believe that knowledge, which Vachon and Urs lacked, is what saved me."

But LaCroix had done his own thinking. "Also, you are of her bloodline. *One always recognizes family*, is what she told me. You haven't experienced that sensation as much, since you deny your heritage so often. But Divia wasn't denying herself any sensation. She was reveling in it," he said, as if newly despising the child. "Your arrival at the club, racing to my rescue, was most precipitous, Nicholas. Thank you."

Nick faltered over the next, "I sensed she'd have to be with you."

"Sensed?"

"All right. I knew I would have to be the fait accompli. She said as much."

"She said you were my favorite, when she was hurling those accursed words at me. Nicholas, my son, my favorite, was dead, she was telling me. That's when I felt myself coming alive again. I had to destroy her, Nicholas, anyway I could. The only thing that bothered me was realizing my strength in no way matched hers. I needed my revenge at that moment, and it looked as though it would be denied me." LaCroix lifted his head, his pale blue eyes twinkling as he recalled, "Then my supposedly dead son came to my rescue. I knew I should have felt your death. I had been blocking her, and that kept me realizing your pain, but the severing of your bond with me would have been too extraordinary not to notice."

Seeking to lighten the mood, and yet not destroy this moment of camaraderie, Nick smiled and teased, "That's because I'm the only child of yours you've bothered to keep track of. Let's face it, the rest of them come and go. I'm not even sure who they all are."

"I have no discernible bond with the others, and only the slightest link, that's true. I can, I've experienced, sense when true death has occurred to one, but I cannot sense their lives, the vibrations of their emotions, the stresses, I can feel from you.

Proximity, and my own desire to maintain and embellish contact with you, is why this is so. Simply put, Nicholas, none of the others have been as compelling to me."

Laughing softly, Nicholas openly wondered what would become of them: "You offered me a thousand lifetimes. You've made it true. But if I regain humanity..."

"What will I do?" LaCroix looked proud for a moment. "This is the first time you've asked me that, Nicholas. It's overdue, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I think," Nick was faltering, "I'm only just realizing how important I am to you. The others have seen it—"

"Oh, yes," LaCroix breathed, deeply delighted at how the conversation had turned. His daughter, his vampire mistress' death, was too unsettling to him. He was glad to leave it behind. Especially when the new topic of discussion was proving so provocative. "Haven't you ever wondered at the amount of tolerance you're shown by members of our community? It is only because of your connection with me, Enforcers and others haven't disposed of you long ago."

"Connection?"

That caused LaCroix to blink. Then, he allowed, "More than that. I do not extend protection to my other offspring. Anyone who touches you has to deal with me. You've been on your own too often, Nicholas, or you would have realized the special dispensation you've been accorded."

"I like being on my own," Nick protested quietly, automatically. "There's less temptation that way. Besides, I remember you rarely sought the company of others in the community."

"That's true. If it weren't for Janette leaving me RAVEN, I would probably be as solitary as you." Maybe, he was thinking to himself, he'd have more time for his favorite harmless pastime: shadowing his son. Some termed it stalking, but that word conjured images of evil intent. That wasn't the case here. LaCroix truly enjoyed looking at his son, whether his son was aware of the scrutiny or not. Nicholas had a face he never tired of gazing upon, a way of looking ten years younger one moment, ten years older the next. It was all in the expression, and the intriguing thoughts going on behind those deep blue eyes. "But you do need some rest," he noticed. "And it is daylight."

"That's all right. I'm not really tired."

But LaCroix was really looking at his son now, searching the perfect features, the full mouth. "You're

looking older, Nicholas. I think that diet your doctor friend has you on is doing you no good whatsoever. You've become so drained, lacking vitality, do you realize you've actually got lines at your eyes? Aging is not possible for us, as you well know." Now he was growing annoyed. "I think what you need is to take one of those vacations you're always avoiding."

"Hawaii at night?" But the notion had taken hold. "With everything going on, that doesn't sound very bad. It's been an interesting year."

"I should say so." LaCroix recited, "You lost your memory when you were shot, you went through an exorcism, you've even been dealing with ghosts and vampires."

"Fortunately, you've been around through most of it. I wouldn't have trusted anyone else, taking me to an exorcist. I remember how reluctant you were. Why did you change your mind?"

Tapping his large silver pinkie ring against the glass, LaCroix told his son, "You threatened me, Nicholas. You actually put your hand to my throat. If you were in your right mind, you'd never have done such a thing. It was frightening, because there was obviously something wrong with you." He didn't remind Nicholas of his son's next action, taking LaCroix's hand in his. That action, signifying a closeness he'd no longer been allowed to feel with his son, had broken his heart. "I'm still not sure I believe in demons, but I have a large area of doubt now." He remembered doing battle with the demon, arguing, staking his claim to his son. "Your recent experience with the reincarnated Francesca is enough to have given me wrinkles I didn't have before." He smirked.

"That was a picnic in comparison to this. At least Francesca was returned in a human body. That was much easier to do battle with."

"Yes, it's bad enough facing human vampire hunters, but when we have to do battle against our own kind... Not to bother you, Nicholas, but I am older than you, and I am feeling rather tired."

Now it was Nick's turn to smirk. "I knew there had to be some disadvantage to being 'far too old and powerful.'"

He sobered. "Yes, but I've also done battle with my evil daughter, someone I did once love very much." He glanced around. "Does this turn into a bed?" he noted the couch he was sitting upon.

"Um, actually..." Nick was realizing this was not turning into his most articulate morning. With a smile at his own awkwardness, he rose from the chair, too shy to look into his master's eyes. "I thought you might

want to rest with me."

Fighting the nagging doubt this was much too good to be true, LaCroix's dark eyebrows rose as he went, "'Rest?'"

If he could face that vampire who'd brought across his own master, you'd think he could look his own father in the eye. So Nick did so. "Lie with me," he made the direct proposition.

"I'd ask if you're sure you really mean that, Nicholas," LaCroix began slowly, "but I know how deliberate you can be. With me, you seldom exhibit spontaneity. So I'll accept the invitation, quite gladly. You know how I've missed you."

That was it. The events of this night had let Nick know how much LaCroix did care for him. Not just his body and the pleasure it could provide, but the individual he truly was. When Divia lay dying, the stake through her heart which Nick had propelled, and Nick had gone to support his father, all it had taken was Nick's support and the command to his father not to go to his daughter's assistance. Nick was obeyed, though Divia lay dying, at that moment—for LaCroix—no vampire mother but only a human daughter. LaCroix could have pulled away, his strength, even wounded, greater than his son's, but there was that moment of instinct, that knowledge for Nick that LaCroix would never pull away from him, not even if it meant comforting his daughter during the throes of death. How could there be a greater love than this? How could Nick not have seen it before?

LaCroix had risen to meet him, so Nick found himself gazing up into the stern face. "I believe we have our own bond," Nick found himself explaining, "perhaps a greater one than you had with Divia. We have history. Tragedy. And love. I don't see why we can't reclaim each other. What—and who—would stop us? I need to feel *life*, right now. Don't you?"

A small smile crooked the corners of LaCroix's mouth. He found it amusing his son would indulge himself in over-explanation when it was all so simple really. "I would never turn down any chance of reclaiming you, Nicholas."

"The bedroom's upstairs," Nick told him, unnecessarily, grasping the other's offered hand.

And so they rose together, to spend the day in the bed in the upper level of the loft. Afterwards, neither Nick nor LaCroix was sure if they'd flown or taken the stairs.

The End

LACROIX, don't tell me you've
remodelled the Raven
again?!



TYPE
O

TYPE
A

TYPE
AB

TYPE
B



I've only added a
buffet Nicholas.
Care for a bite...?

Leah Rosenthal

Enjoy My Hospitality

by
- Z.P. Florian -

The rail-thin form of the priest was a stark black exclamation mark against the white-washed walls. He was facing a walled-in door with a small opening on it.

Behind that door dwelt the Countess Bathory, the dreaded Hungarian noblewoman said to be the murderer of countless serfs, Erzsebet Bathory, the beautiful and educated woman, who bathed in the blood of her victims, to preserve her youthful appearance.

Confined now to a single room in her castle as her punishment.

"It is me, Pater Fabrizio," he said. "Greetings, my daughter."

"You have no daughters, Father, you are barren as a dead tree," came the insolent answer through the wall. "I'd vastly prefer being called Milady, as it befits my rank."

"We are but children in God," he replied.

"If this is all you have to say, you might as well go back to Rome. Why have you come?"

For a moment, he wondered if she had aged much in her imprisonment. "I came for the truth."

"Truth is a slippery fish, Father."

"Not the one I am after. Do you indeed have proof of God's existence? Fear not, no one can hear us."

Her voice was clear and pleasant. "So this is your quest. Envoy of the Pope, are you dying to know if there is indeed a God or your entire life had been wasted on false idols?"

"Answer me."

"I do have proof. I've seen irrefutable signs of His power." She sounded nonchalant, as if being walled in

and called a monster meant nothing to her. "Do you remember my visitors, Father?"

"I do...what does it have to do with... You want to tell the story, the true story, at least once before you die."

The silence was long. "Yes..." she said finally. "Will you listen?"

"Till the very end."

"Bring a chair...It will be long. I will be seated and we can talk, as if this wall between us wouldn't exist."

He did that, pulling the chair close to the slot in the door, resisting the desire to peek inside.

"I've been here when they arrived," he said.

"What did you see?" she asked.

"Two noblemen, one blond, the other...he was shorn too short to determine...both well-dressed, not after the Hungarian fashion, more in the style of France."

"Have you seen the strange beauty of their stance, their gait, their confidence?" the countess inquired.

"No, not that."

"I've seen that, as a woman. I wanted him. The younger one, Nicolas. Teased him that night, gently, just as a countess is allowed to...called him Miklos, in my language. Sounds almost exactly like Nicolas, but sweeter on my tongue. I didn't want the other one then."

"Have you fornicated with both?"

"Yes. And believe me, no mortal man compares to them."

"Do you mean to say they are not mortal?"

"Oh, father, you are getting ahead in the story. That first night was rather ordinary. Noble travelers, seeking

shelter in my castle. A storm was approaching. You were here, engaging in endless theological discussions with my priests. I offered the guests cold meat and wine. They both were a little pale...I thought the early autumn chill...the long ride... I had the food sent up to their room, had the fire lit in there. Sent up a basin of hot water for their wash and a comely maid."

"For their use?"

"Oh, indeed, father. Men have needs. One must anticipate that they might want a wench." She hesitated. "This is not quite true. I'd sent the maid to see how Nicolas treats a woman in his bed. For, you see, I wanted to know whether he is worthy to join me in mine. I gave him the room called the Wooden Rose... after a carved rose over the bed, on the wall. There's a peephole on that. My ancestors used it often, to spy on their guests. I used it to feast my eyes on Nicolas as he washed. I've never seen a man with golden hair... there. And with skin so white, so immaculate. When he was done with his wash, he took the maid to his bed. The other man...he just stood there, watching. As I did. I thought he was...envious. But Nicolas, he didn't do much lovemaking. You see, father, he was hungry... not with a mortal, manly hunger, but with something more. He drank of her blood. Then... he lifted her up in his arms, like an offering, to the older man, Lucien, and he bent over her, and drank of her. I saw her die, drained... left on the carpet, like a pile of discarded clothes. Nicolas, content as a cat, slept, so beautiful, seemed but an innocent boy, with the other man, like a father, watching over him. That a dead body shared their room never bothered them. I knew then that they were not men at all, but supernatural beings, what people call vampires... We have given them a name, yet do we know what they are? And do they know? What's the reason of their existence? Why did God make them? What purpose do they serve in this world? I can spend the rest of my life wondering about it. Yet how can I hope to find an answer, when they've lived for centuries and couldn't say? But I digress."

"Before dawn that morning, they took the body of the girl out into the woods and left her there. Nicolas, I thought, felt a little sorry for her, but the older one felt nothing. Nothing at all. I thought at that time, that Nicolas was much like a fallen angel, displaced and uncertain... and Lucien... he was without doubts. In the morning, we were looking for the maid, I'd sent men to search for her, though I knew of her fate. Yes, I was protecting them, or more precisely, Nicolas. I wanted him. I didn't want to let him go, before I could hold him

in my arms and know him, in the biblical sense, and any other way there is."

"Sin is in the nature of the woman," the priest murmured.

"I wanted to know him. Were I a man, you'd say I was seeking theological knowledge. Never mind. I got what I wanted."

"At the price of how many innocent lives?"

"They talk about six hundred. A gross exaggeration. There were no more than eighty." The Countess sounded quite cheerful. "And even my Miklos, Nicolas, had said it was not possible for him to make love to me without taking my life. He was wrong. I was right. There was a way."

"Drink, my Miklos. Drink. I know your hunger. Look at her, how plump and white her neck is, drink all you want, my angel. Look, she's ready for you, drink. Drink more. You can't be sated yet, my Miklos. I can feel your fangs, my angel. Drink. It arouses you, my love. Don't be shy. Drink more. There's another one, if this girl dies. Drink more, my angel, drink, szerelmes angyalom, beloved, you are at home in my castle, let me take off your shirt, your belt. Let me free your proud lance, my thirsty angel, I'll take my pleasure with you, while you drink of her."

"No, I'll take you, too, you'll die...."

"Drink more, my angel, I'll wait till you are sated. Drink."

She wipes the blood that stains his mouth, her hands are gentle and deft. She is not afraid of him, perhaps she's foolish, or too confident. She thinks she's exceptional. Her cold cruelty toward the frightened girls repulses him. Yet he can't resist the offerings, she's catering to his hunger, she talks to his darkness, she cherishes his true self, she wants not the man he had been but the vampire he became. She strokes his skin with her warm fingers, the rustle of her stiff skirts loud in his ears as she moves over him. The servant girl lays limp and pale, and the Countess nudges her closer, so that her neck is touching his lips. Drink, she says, drink, my angel, and he's floating on a red ocean of blood, dazed, drunk, helpless and almost frightened. His control is slipping, his remembered humanity fades beyond the crimson horizon. The blood is sweet in his mouth. He's naked now, buried under her heavy velvet skirts, as she straddles him, triumphant like a succubus,

riding him, and through the haze of bloodlust, he feels he's being raped. Impossible, to be raped by a woman, yet her triumph is his defeat, and what's rape if not this?

LaCroix stands in the shadows, slightly smiling. For him, this is a farce, another lesson for his eternally reluctant child. This is what Nicolas needs, he thinks, to learn what kind of strange relationships exist for a prodigal son, if he tries to break the bonds with his maker. This is a remarkable woman, cruel beyond any mortal, yet intelligent, curious, seductive...she thinks she can have power over Nicolas. He will rebel against her sooner or later... and when he does, he will come to me.

She looks at LaCroix now, glorious in her pleasure, her dark eyes blazing with joy and understanding. "You want him, too," she says, her glance sweeping over the master vampire, assessing his erection.

LaCroix keeps silent.

"Have him," the Countess says. "I'd like to see how it's done. I've heard of such practices. Will he like it? Oh, I see. It's not something you'd do while I watch. Could it be that you are shy, vampire? I'm not shy in front of you. You are not human. Shouldn't you be free of such common emotions? Modesty?"

LaCroix smiles a little.

"Or it's that you don't share...not even a bit?"

The smile widens, almost imperceptibly.

"Look at my Miklos, how he trembles."

"You talk too much," LaCroix says. "I doubt Nicolas finds these interruptions very entertaining."

The Countess pouts, not very seriously. Drink, she urges Nicolas, drink more. But he is not interested in the half-dead girl, he reaches out for the Countess, baring her breasts.

"Beautiful," he purrs.

"Yes, I've always been very proud of them," she smiles, and moves against him suddenly, laughing as he cries out his pleasure.

LaCroix turns away.

As morning comes, the Countess leaves before the first light, just when the night is darkest. From her room, she watches the two vampires through the peephole. In the golden candlelight, she sees LaCroix undressing. Her eyes grow large. "My God," she gasps. "How well he's favored! I must have him! Jesus and Mary, he can't think of spearing my poor Miklos with that!"

"Continue, my daughter, consider this your confession," the priest urged.

"At that time, they refused to include me in their own kind of fornication. I could only watch them through the peephole. It was a strange kind of love they made, they drank each other's blood, and behaved much like one expect two vampires to behave, wild, but... father, they were magnificent. The fabled lions of far lands could be so savage, so powerful in their coupling."

"But how can you consider the existence of such evil creatures as a proof of God's glory?"

"What else can I take them for? Think, father, if evil can be so magnificent, how powerful God has to be to triumph over it?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Not at all. I've seen what even a small part of His power did to them. A little golden cross from the Holy Land, brought to my family by crusaders, burned my poor Miklos badly. And although they both entered the chapel in my castle, neither would enter the village church, because that, as they said, was truly holy. The slightest ray of sunlight was harmful to them. Swords and pistols barely hurt them, yet a drop of holy water does them harm. Some say that vampires can be truly killed by a wooden stake, or by beheading, or just by being outside when the sun is out. They are powerful, but very vulnerable, their power is balanced by their many disadvantages. If I ever doubted His existence, I know now that when I die, I will be judged at the door of paradise."

"And what, may I ask, that judgement would be, with your soul weighted with sins, with the blood of innocent peasant girls, whom you've thrown as food to the two beasts you've harbored?"

"Perhaps He will understand that I was only curious."

"Blasphemer."

"Never mind, father, it's between me and God. And remember, when it comes to worldly authorities, I'll maintain my first confession: that the girls were slaughtered so that I can bathe in their blood to preserve my beauty. I don't want hundreds of gendarmes and guards chasing after my guests. After all, they were my guests, I owe them hospitality."

"You could save yourself by denouncing them. This wall could come down. The Holy Father would extend his forgiveness to you, if you'd help the church

to apprehend two vampires."

"No."

"And if I'll tell about your story?"

"I'd say it's a lie, born from your depraved cravings for my body."

"You are indeed a very wicked woman."

"Just very determined." There was a smug smile in her voice.

"She wants you, LaCroix, she wants you more than she ever wanted me."

"She's a child, always asking for a new toy."

"And you are not a toy."

"Well said."

"Beware of her. Why don't we leave?"

"I like it here. With all the time we have, a few months of her hospitality is an enjoyable experience. I like to see you well fed."

Nicolas turned on the bed, his hair molten gold in the candlelight. "She's watching us even now."

"I know," LaCroix smiles indulgently. "There is no harm in it. She pretends she doesn't peek and I pretend I believe her. She has manners. Don't you think she'd make a splendid vampire?"

"No."

"Jealous?"

"No. She's too cold, too cruel. She'd kill often and needlessly."

"Oh, and since when is a merciful heart a prerequisite for vampires?"

"Have you never met one that was too savage even for you?"

LaCroix said nothing for a while. Nicolas waited. The answer never came.

"This is a yes, if I've ever heard one," he said finally.

"A long story. I'll tell you when the time is right."

"She'd be no better than the one you don't want to talk about."

"Perhaps. But we spend too much time talking about her." LaCroix reached out to take off the soft white shirt that was already halfway off Nicolas' shoulder.

The door opens. The Countess stands there, resplendent in dark velvet, and very angry. "You could make me like you and you've never told me!"

"Would you want it?" LaCroix inquires.

"No. I'm not going to risk my salvation."

LaCroix laughs. "Your salvation is already very doubtful, Countess."

"No. God is forgiving. I still have a chance. I can gain salvation even on my deathbed." She's confident in her belief. "But I'm angry because you've never offered the choice to me."

"I don't offer that to anyone," LaCroix says.

Her eyes stray to the expanse of naked skin on Nicolas' shoulder. Desire clouds her eyes. Her anger is forgotten. "Have you fed already, my angel?"

The flash in his eyes answers her. She goes to him, fascinated by his hunger. "What do you feel, when you're hungry? Tell me, how does the blood taste? Is it like food, is it like wine? Is the hunger in your belly, like it is for us mortals? Or does it —"

"Tell her, Nicolas," LaCroix says with a mock smile. "Tell her it burns like hellfire."

The Countess buries her fingers in the vampire's blond hair. "Do you think of me as food, my Miklos, or is lovemaking sweeter than blood?"

Nicolas averts his eyes. He hates this. How many times he wished that it'd be different — that there would be something stronger in his world than the Hunger. He's humiliated by the Beast that reduces him to a starving animal time and again. In the moments when the Countess managed to feed him to the point of fulfillment, he felt fully human, enjoyed sex like a normal man. At what price — how many peasant girls did he kill in the red haze of bloodlust? I hate her, he thinks, correcting himself with cruel honesty — no, I hate myself.

He stands up, not caring that the shirt slides off his shoulders. "LaCroix, we are leaving."

"I told you I'd rather stay," his Master says.

"I'm leaving." Nicolas begins to gather his clothes. The Countess looks at LaCroix. They understand each other. She reaches for the bellpull. A maid comes running, afraid to come but even more afraid to disobey.

LaCroix closes the door.

"You didn't let him leave?"

"No. I had the older vampire to help me. It wasn't really difficult to make him forget what he wanted. They are really not human beings. Their hunger for blood controls them. They are fearsome creatures, but as you see, I am alive after meeting them. They stayed in the palace much longer... Nicolas tried to leave time

and again, and once he even refused to feed for days, didn't want to take the lives of the girls I've supplied them with."

"A trace of mercy must live in him still...."

"Oh, but he was most exciting when he was hungry. His eyes burned with an unholy flame, and his fascinating fangs were long... and he tried, my beautiful beast, he tried so hard to refuse the blood... I had to cut the veins of the girl to drive him past reason and then he fed...."

"But at the end, they left anyway."

The snow melted, leaving the countryside muddy and dark. LaCroix stood at the window, looking out at the full moon rising. He was getting tired of the Countess lately. He regretted already that he had given in to her urging and made love to her. She became more demanding — not as much of him, but of Nicolas. She began thinking of him as her own toy, her property. This annoyed LaCroix far more than he cared to admit. Leaving, he thinks, would mean to allow Nicolas to have his way, still, rather than Nicolas thinks he'd won, than the Countess. Being supplied with unlimited food without having to hunt wasn't bad... but eventually, the peasants would start protesting the disappearance of their daughters and better that happens when we are far away, LaCroix muses.

He turns to see Nicolas on the bed, among plump pillows stained with fresh blood. A half-dead girl whimpers beside him, the Countess sits there, stroking the vampire's lips with her fingers.

LaCroix decides he had enough. He strides over to the bed. "Sleep," he says, looking directly into Erzsebet's eyes. He finds it eminently satisfying that she falls asleep immediately. He then ends the life of the girl at once, and sits down to look at Nicolas. My child, he smiles, my most beautiful child. In the candlelight, as always, LaCroix admires the gold of the hair, the blue of the eyes. He delights in the knowledge that his favored son is immortal — that they'll be together for a long, long time. Beggars and kings, popes and rogues will come and go, short-lived mortals all...but they, two magnificent predators, will remain — together.

Nicolas looks up. "We're leaving?" he asks, sensing his Master's decision.

"Shortly," LaCroix says. "In an hour. I have

something to attend to first."

"What?"

"This." LaCroix leans down and sinks his fangs into the smooth neck. His hand closes on Nicolas' erection. Nicolas answers with an involuntary purr, reaching up to embrace his Master. LaCroix's touch is liberating, as much as the Countess' greedy excitement made him feel used. He doesn't know that his vague feelings mirror the Master's thoughts very closely — two of a kind, he thinks, what do we have to gain from mortals — the righteous kind thinks us monsters, the perverted ones try to use us as toys. If a vampire is cursed, Nicolas thinks, at least I am not alone. LaCroix's palm teases and caresses him while his blood, rich with the life of a young girl, nourished the Master. A part of Nicolas' mind cries out at the monstrous picture, but he can't help feeling loved and safe at the same time when LaCroix joins their bodies with a deep thrust. If this is what being damned means, he thinks, perhaps I shouldn't protest it too much. LaCroix feels the complete surrender and delights in it, even if he knows that his dearest child will brood and rebel against him soon enough. But if the occasional surrender is this sweet, perhaps I shouldn't complain, he smiles to himself. And for the moment, both of them are supremely content.

"I was angry when they were gone," the Countess confessed. "But still, what I've had was priceless. Now I'm ready to die. I am convinced that there is a God, and another, even more interesting life awaits us."

"In hell," the priest whispered. "For you."

"Maybe I'll meet my vampires there."

"If I understand your tale correctly, even the monster was appalled by your callous cruelty."

"Oh, then you'll meet my Miklos in heaven," she retorted.

The priest had enough. "We have nothing to talk about anymore. I shall consider this your confession and say not a word to anyone. Let the world believe what you want to be known, that Erzsebet Bathory bathed in the blood of young girls to preserve her beauty. It's no less repulsive than the truth."

As the priest left, he thought he'd heard the Countess praying. He wondered if she prayed for her salvation...or for the return of her vampires.

The End

Third Time's the Charm

by
- Cros -

The two fledglings tumbled and played in their dim safe den. They bit at each other with their baby canines, and squealed if the tiny fangs only dimpled the skin; they fought over rank, position, a scrap of blanket or a rag of dirty clothing. The male, larger and stronger, often won their mock battles, and would then mount and fuck the female until she acknowledged his superiority. She would stand for him, her face slack, eyes glazed with pleasure and submission — and then, five minutes later, bite and cuff him again.

But they both left off their squabbles when their parent arrived, landing in the middle of the cluttered den with a swoosh. He carried prey, they saw instantly, paralyzed and helpless. Its blood thundered through its veins, rich and sweet with life.

"What — " the prey said blurrily. "Wha — at is this? Why's everything dark? Why can't I move — " Whimpering with hunger, the fledglings sidled closer.

"Sh-shoo!" the parent ordered, and, cowed, they slunk back, slightly. He was a strict parent; he made them practice the various commands and stances right then and there. They froze into invisibility, flew swiftly and bodilessly across the roof of their den, compelled imaginary prey (not nearly as tantalizingly irresistible as the real live prey across the room, the prey whose terror rose like a delicious dew in the air) with the power of their eyes. The male was better than the female at these exercises; where she fumbled awkwardly, he flowed in near perfection. It was almost as if he had practiced these skills before, often and in the most severe exigencies that time could supply. And as he

practiced, it seemed that memories arose, shadows against the vivid, inchoate tide of instinct and need that was all a fledgling owned of mind. Almost, it seemed he — remembered —

"Well done, my chicks; well done," the parent told them. They abased themselves before him with gratitude and submissive awe. Behind them, the prey cried out in fear. "God, what's happening? It's so dark — so dark — Can't anyone hear me?" Terror and helplessness pulsed through its voice, like blood, like life. Irresistible. They quivered at the sound.

"All right, my chicks," He caressed them, holding them back a second longer. "All right — you may feed."

They sprang on the word. The prey screamed once, twice, in agony and terror. The shriek died to a gurgle when the female tore its throat out, and all noise ceased shortly after that, except for the splatter of still warm blood and flesh against the walls of the den as the female tore at her meal.

Fledglings were not particularly neat eaters.

The male — hesitated. He didn't know why. Hunger spurred him cruelly, but something about the prey's open eyes, glazing now in death; the single hand outstretched — something. He felt memories and emotions rise, unfamiliar, unwanted, like sharp edged rocks beneath a peaceful shoal. Almost, he remembered — why and who he was —

"No!" The parent's hand descended like the wrath of God. "No, and no, and no! When I say feed, you do as I say!" The fledgling cringed and whimpered beneath the hail of blows. The female watched, sympathetically, warily; she kept on eating, but furtively, in case his rage turned on her

next.

He saw it, of course; he saw everything. "Ah, no, sweet chick. You do very well, my sweet Natalie." She abased herself as he caressed her. "But you!" The male wailed under the blows. He presented for mounting, hugging the floor, and cried out again as the parent entered him roughly and painfully. There was not an ounce of resistance in him; with his parent's full will concentrated upon him, body penetrating and subjugating him, an irresistible force of age, of power, and the implacable weight of time rolled over and through him like a tidal wave. He had no mind, no memories, no being except a fledgling's most basic instincts — to hide, to feed, and to obey.

"And this time, Nicholas," his parent, his father swore as he fucked the younger male, "This time, Nicholas, I'm raising you right!"

The End

My Gift

When I first saw you,
my golden knight,
I knew that I had to have you.

You touched my heart, my soul
like no other had before.
To stand by and watch you
grow old and die?
Impossible!

So I seduced you to my side,
gave you the dark gift,
to see your golden beauty
undamaged by time

07 September 1996

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The Final Knight

by

- Natasha Barry -

They'd been stuck in the midwest for a while now. Traveling was far more difficult than it used to be. Even in this century of telecommunications and multiple modes of transportation, LaCroix and his blood in son, now calling himself Nicholas Dark, found the scarcity of food limiting their endurance as well as impeding their would-be schedule.

News was erratic, as well, though they had been hearing scattered reports from emissaries who'd ventured as near New York City as possible, since the ocean level had obliterated the city when the island of Manhattan had sunk during a recent earthquake, the fault line running though that island far worse than anything notorious California could boast.

"Canada is still safe. We could try Montreal." Quipped LaCroix, the elder of the two vampires, "It's not as if we'd be destroyed in a natural disaster." He had, after all, as he'd confided to his son, his Nicholas, survived the eruption of Pompeii itself. "Unless we're accidentally beheaded, of course. And I'm not sure that will do it. Strength comes with age, and you are of my blood."

But Nick was already shaking his head. "I don't want to return to Canada. Not even Mon-treal."

"It is a small taste of Paris."

"I'd rather return to Europe."

LaCroix sighed, but he was a longtime expert at resolving difficult situations, his campaign experience as a general in the Roman army having always held him in good stead. "That still means making it to the coast. We could make our way to what's left of the West Coast, as there are some pilots who must travel the continent. It could be possible to charter a plane."

"What about from here?"

LaCroix stated, "I've looked into it. I feel ridiculous enough, needing a plane. But the local pilots haven't

the connections, yet, to guarantee refueling en route or for the return. No one wants to risk being stranded somewhere."

"It would make more sense traveling to France from the East Coast."

"Yes," LaCroix agreed. "The rumor is Boston has a functional airport. Landing can be risky, however, due to the weather conditions. You should remember that."

Nick did remember. "They usually end up closing at some point. Is there any way to find out if there's a storm?" Before the other could even respond, Nick hurried on with, "But what about the other option — heading south? I know Florida is closed off, and Tennessee is virtually swamp land — most of the deep south is — but what about the Virginias or even Georgia?"

"And how would we get there?"

"No pilot will go to the south, either?"

"No one local. They're playing it safe, staying in this vicinity. Really, you can't blame them. Most of them have families, and responsibilities. They can't afford to be daredevils."

"No, I don't blame them." Nick turned his head, contemplating the water, the breeze lifting the hair which he'd allowed to grow to shoulder length — again. He hadn't had his hair this long in many decades, but LaCroix, his lover, preferred it longer, so he'd fashioned it to please him. The long tresses presumably were a reminder of their early days together, when Nick was first made, and then seduced. A happy, sensual, carefree time. At least, that's how they each chose to remember it in their discussions.

Gazing at LaCroix again, the severely shorn head, the pale blue eyes, and the sensual mouth, Nick felt again that striking charisma which first attracted him. More, though, he experienced the tenderness and security of their constant companionship.

They'd gone through many rough times, in their hundreds of years saga, but they'd settled into peace and mutual understanding and tolerance — finally. They didn't battle at all, anymore, unless it was in fun, to make their otherwise calm relationship a bit more passionate.

"You always dominate a room, whenever you enter it," Nick observed.

The elder had already sensed what his son was feeling. "No one's as handsome as you."

But Nick's thoughts were elsewhere. "There is Janette, of course. Perhaps she is still in Montreal."

"Not knowing where we are," considered LaCroix, "she may have already made her way to France. Paris, as she is so fond of saying, has always been her home. All the more reason to venture there as soon as possible."

Nick brightened like a little boy. Then his face fell. "But the food..."

"That is the eternal problem now, isn't it?"

"I won't take humans," the young blond declared. A former knight who'd soldiered during the crusades, he'd never been comfortable with that aspect of his nature. That dissatisfaction with his own state had led to the first of many rows between his mentor and himself.

But it was also imperative they reach Janette, once his sister through their mutual sire, LaCroix, and his former lover. Now Janette was sired by him, brought across into vampirism after she'd managed to achieve a brief sensation of mortality. But most importantly, Janette was his closest friend, outside of LaCroix himself. For her, Nick might have to abandon his scruples when it came to the source of his sustenance.

"I have no way of knowing if we'll find animals with which to feed on," LaCroix was stating. "But we should reach Montreal, even if it means prolonged starvation. Though a few days of flight should be all that's necessary, since we must journey without mechanical assistance."

"Quebec is still functioning?"

"Probably overpopulated, with the influx of Eastern Americans, but otherwise all right."

Secretly, Nick was relieved LaCroix hadn't committed them to feasting on humans — yet. That meant the term was negotiable until a crisis was reached.

Glancing up at the gathering clouds, full enough to be visible even in the dim light of night, Nick said, "Good. Let's try for it then. The waiting does neither of us any good."

"If she's not in Montreal anymore, you'll sense it. In that case, we'll know to obtain transport to France. From Canada, it may not be difficult."

Nick remembered not wanting to return to Canada, but if that was where Janette was, or where transportation to Europe could be claimed, that was where they would need to be. But when he'd left Toronto, and his job there as a police detective, becoming a missing person and possible fugitive from justice in the death of his friend and would-be lover, Natalie Lambert, he'd naturally thought never to return. He and LaCroix had left the city together, assuming secrecy to be of paramount importance. Hence, their eventual effort at losing themselves amid the heartland of America. And this was where they were caught...

"Oh," LaCroix was reminding himself of something, "something I've been meaning to return to you."

"What's that?"

LaCroix casually removed a gold pocket watch from his jacket. Carefully, he handed it over.

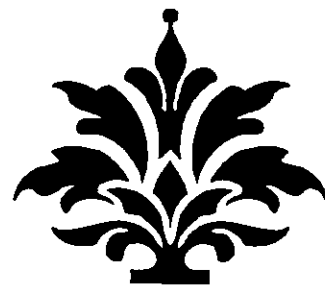
Nick examined it quickly, curtly, and then gave a smile. It was the gift from LaCroix he'd returned earlier in the decade. FOREVER, it said. Now Nick knew exactly what that meant. But the difference was, now he didn't mind it so much. "Forever," he said, his eyes meeting those of his mentor and lover.

Near the shore, the tide was coming in. As if that was the signal, a few thunderbolts were raised: Fireworks, leftovers from a bygone era. But humans were nothing if not resilient.

The two immortals were grinning easily now, both at themselves and to each other. Perhaps, most importantly, to those humans they now took joy in contemplating.

It was the final night of the twentieth century.

The End



Better Off Dead

by

- Gingersnapp -

Tracy Vetter was a good cop, every one said so. Of course her father, the police commissioner, made sure of that. So when she insisted they stop in the darkest alley, in the worst part of Toronto, and Nick Knight wait in the car while she met an informer, Nick merely smiled. He watched her disappear into the darkness and distracted himself by fiddling with the radio. After several agonizing seconds of country music he found the station which carried that silky voiced creature known as the NightCrawler. However, dead air met his ear and that was no reflection on LaCroix's condition, even if he'd had a reflection.

Two shots pierced the silence, echoing endlessly eastward in an alliteration opportunity. "Trace?" Knight called hesitantly. He knew Tracy's abilities and for a moment relaxed back against the caddy's seat. Then, like a bolt of lightning, he remembered it was Tracy Vetter out there in the dark. His ass would be grass if she ended up dead, or as the department now liked to label it, mortality challenged. "Tracy, come back!" Knight shouted. Using his Super Speedy Vampire Flight Skills and not the cheesy FX from the first season, he flew to his partner's side. It was too late. Too, too late. Poor Tracy, Nick lamented. His partner lay on her back, eyes open and empty, face an expressionless expanse of skin. Nick frowned, momentarily unsure. He leaned close. Yes, she was dead.

"Ah, Nicholas," LaCroix's smooth voice licked the detective's ear, almost figuratively. "Whatever has befallen your perky partner?"

"A bullet, LaCroix," Nick snarled. LaCroix brought out the worst in him, always making cryptic statements and profound observations. And besides, if he had to endure dead partner jokes for the next 800 years the only profound observation LaCroix would be making

would be that of a wooden stake entering his chest cavity. "She's dead."

"How can you tell?" The elder vampire asked, bending over for a closer look at the deceased. "Oh yes, blood is pouring from her heart in a most appealing way, isn't it? He canted an eyebrow at the blond detective, "Nicholas, are you going to...?"

"Don't be disgusting!" Nick turned his back, ignoring the slurping sounds coming from behind him.

"Hey, Knight," Javier Vachon called, landing softly, his long beautiful hair fanning out around his incredibly handsome face. Large brown eyes glittered beneath thick lashes, and his lips were soft red slashes against pale, Bodiesque, flesh. "Where's Tracy? She asked me to meet her here."

"She wanted to meet with you here?" Knight demanded. "What, she needed more information about vampires or space aliens or something?" Knight was slightly jealous of the young Spaniard's position in his partner's confidences.

"I don't know what she wanted," Vachon admitted. He took a step back when LaCroix rose from where he had been ... inspecting Tracy's body. "What the hell....?" His eye fell on Tracy's lifeless body and horror twisted his face, but not enough to make it unattractive in any way. "Tracy!" He staggered over to her, kneeling on the cold ground and scooping her into his arms. "She's dead," he wailed then paused and peered up at Nick. "Isn't she?"

"Yes," Knight hissed, his eyes flashing yellow and fangs springing into view, "and we have to find out who did this!" He began pacing the length of the ally, ignoring LaCroix who sat on a dumpster licking his fingers clean. "How did she contact you?" he asked Vachon.

"This note," Vachon held out a sheet of paper.

In perky purple ink and bearing the logo of the TPD,

Nick read the words *"Meet me in that really dark ally behind the tattoo parlor. Midnight. Come alone."*

"Why didn't you let me know what she was planning?" Knight raged.

"I was gonna," Vachon protested, "just that since Screed bought it I've been kind of distracted. That little guy could do the most amazing things with his tongue."

"Too much information," LaCroix called from his perch.

"Why would she..." Knight never got to finish his tortured, yet caring question. There was a swoosh of air displacement and Vachon fell to the ground with a three foot length of pine protruding from his chest.

"Vachon!" Nick gasped and raced to the fallen vampire's side. He knelt there, watching in shocked silence as the young vampire feebly attempted to remove the stake from his chest.

"Could you..." Javier panted, blood pouring from his chest, mouth and nose, dripping into the gutter. "If it's not too much trouble..."

"That's gotta hurt," LaCroix observed.

"Yeah, as a matter of fact - ach!" Vachon gasped, sputtered, shivered, shuddered, and died. Knight frowned.

"This is getting ridiculous," the Toronto detective proclaimed. "First Tracy, then Vachon. Who next?" Nick pondered the evidence. He studied Tracy's body, the trajectory of the bullet which had killed her then the angle of the stake which had perforated the perfect pecs of the vampire. A switch clicked over in his mind and he faced his maker.

"Why did you do it, LaCroix?"

"However did you know it was me?"

"Don't be a fool," Knight growled, "I know your handiwork. You knocked off everyone I've ever cared about for the last 500 years. Why, LaCroix? Just tell me why."

"Oh, Nicholas," the elder vampire purred. "Can you really stand there and tell me you can not phantom my reasons? We, the children of the night, roaming a thousand starry nights, alone in the vast expanse of eternity. We, the few, the blessed by the Dark Gift, sharing the secrets of the ages, clinging to the fringes of civilization, wandering lonely streets and Trek cons in search of..."

"Is this going to take much longer?" Nick asked consulting his watch. "It is summer and she isn't getting any fresher."

"The gist of the matter is," LaCroix stepped closer,

his palely handsome face intent on Knight, "I was getting tired of her, Nicholas."

Nick considered this for a moment. Tracy had been as annoying as hell. She had the habit of running off on her own when she hadn't a clue as to how to solve a case, she got into trouble he had to pull her out of, and she was so damn perky! But she had been a living soul, not to mention the Commissioner's daughter. "But what about Vachon? Were you tired of him as well?"

"I hardly knew him," LaCroix confessed. "I saw very little of him this season."

"And yet you killed him." It was an accusation LaCroix met with icy blue eyes.

"Yes, I did." The ancient vampire leaned close to his child, his words tickling the ear he whispered into, "He missed Screed-So Much. Mercy-staking, you know it."

"What about me?" Nick asked.

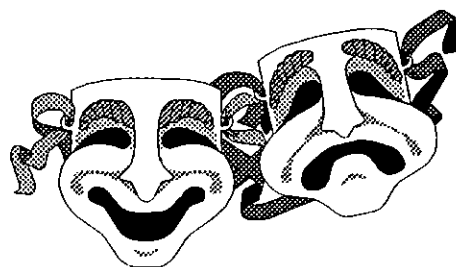
"Oh, my Nicholas," LaCroix's fangs gleamed in the street light, "I plan to stake you and you will cry for mercy."

"Why didn't you say so?" Knight let himself be wrapped in the powerful embrace, surrendered to the ecstasy of those sharp teeth plunging into his throat. "I hope you have a *coffin* big enough for us both."

The eastern sky began to lighten, vampiric senses tingled with warning. LaCroix looked into the distance. Who knew what images flickered in the mind of a being who had witnessed thousands upon thousands of nights? "I suppose you want to be on top?"

"We'll take turns," Knight assured him. Two silhouettes danced across the red sky, apart then together, heading towards a cozy coffin built for two.

The End



Interlude When Contemplating a More Permanent Hell

by
- B.B. -

Author's note: I gratefully acknowledge Ron Taylor, story writer of the episode, "A More Permanent Hell" for the few lines from this episode that used to introduce and end this story. Read on and I hope you enjoy it.

Nicholas felt his presence, La Croix was there in his apartment. He had been there before, but not usually when Nicholas was also present. Finally Nicholas asked, "What do you want?"

La Croix' answer was the most honest Nick had heard in many years from his master. "What I've always wanted, companionship."

"Why me?" Nicholas asked.

"You can best appreciate the irony of my situation. You young ones are fortunate. Most of you will eventually starve and die. I will grieve on that day, for my Nicholas, my Janette." La Croix' eyes were sad as he spoke.

"And what will happen to you?" Nick questioned.

"Ah, we ancient immortals will linger for some while after you're gone. I have been delivered from death to a more permanent hell," La Croix drank with distaste from the glass of cow blood he held.

They were close, close enough to touch. Nick was not sure he wanted La Croix' touch. For so many years his touch meant pain. He lifted his eyes to look with La Croix'. He knew he was taking the

chance of his master mesmerizing him. If he did Nick would have to do anything La Croix wanted. As their eyes met, the wariness was there in Nick's, but La Croix did not seek the dominance he had so often used on Nick.

This time there was only a slightly sad but very real hunger in their blue depths. No anger, no promise of punishment, just a need to be with Nick. He knew that need, had known it a few times when it was good between himself and La Croix. But it had been so long he was not sure if he could do what La Croix so obviously needed him to do.

Suddenly he knew he wanted to try. The immensity of the impending doom truly seemed real to him for the first time and he found himself in La Croix' arms. His own wrapped with crushing force around the strong form of his master. Nick hid his face in La Croix' neck, eyes closed, body trembling slightly. La Croix was afraid. He would never admit it, but he was. Nick did not want him to be afraid. In spite of all the years they had been apart because of "irreconcilable differences" Nick did still love La Croix. He had been the center of Nicholas' world for hundreds of years. Even when he ran away because he wanted to be free of La Croix'

domination and find a way to be mortal again. Still he knew La Croix was always there somewhere, and would find him someday. He had dreaded those some days because running away was an insult to the master and he punished Nick cruelly when he caught up with him.

Most times he had been tongue lashed, physically thrashed, and then used sexually. Usually it was while he was still recovering from the beating. It happened dozens of times during their nearly eight hundred year association. Because of this Nick was not sure he could respond freely to La Croix in a sexual way. He decided to try anyway.

La Croix had been reading Nick's mind. He always did when in direct contact with his body and swept Nick up into his arms and walked toward Nick's bedroom. Nick had time to get over his surprise. He slid his arms up around Lucien's neck and made himself comfortable in his master's arms. He deliberately thought "sigh, Lucien" and leaned his head on the broad shoulder so convenient to his head. Lucien actually laughed in genuine amusement. It startled Nick from his comfortable spot to look up at La Croix' face in wonder.

"Did you forget I could laugh, my Nicholas?" La Croix questioned softly with a fond look at the younger vampire in his arms.

"It has been a very long time since I heard you truly laugh, and in these times it seems even stranger," was Nick's equally soft reply.

"Perhaps now is just the proper time for laughter, Nicholas. It is one of the nicer things about mortals, the ability to laugh in the face of ultimate disaster." The sadness was back in La Croix' face.

"I didn't mean to bring..." Nick began to apologize.

"Hush, little one. I know you didn't," La Croix interrupted, hugging Nick a little harder for a second as they entered Nick's spacious bedroom.

La Croix paused to look around as if this was new territory to him. Then he proceeded to the bed and laid Nick down on the black satin sheets, and sat beside him.

Nick shook his head and in a wry tone said,

"You've been in here before. I've sensed you several times. You never disturbed anything so I never minded you being here, especially after things calmed down between us." Nick lowered his eyes, and if a vampire could blush he would have done so then. The look on La Croix' face was openly loving and Nick was not used to that.

Without another word La Croix leaned down and kissed Nick on the forehead. It was a fatherly sort of kiss but Nick could sense another feeling rising in his companion, a much more passionate one. The second kiss was to Nick's nose. His eyes crossed as he tried to watch Lucien's face through the procedure. Lucien chuckled at the funny face Nick made. The next kiss was to Nick's lips, and this one was not fatherly at all. Nick lay quietly, but trembled slightly with almost equal parts anticipation and apprehension.

Lucien's eyes held passion, and Nick resigned himself to losing the clothes he was wearing. He liked this suit. Usually Lucien just tore them from his body as he became excited.

Lucien, on the other hand, seemed intent on not doing the usual thing. He reached out slowly and began to unbutton Nick's shirt. Then slipping his hands inside he slid them over the hard muscles of the former knight's chest. Each hand found a nipple and rubbed it till it was a hard nub under his fingers. Nick's eyes closed and he arched up into his master's touch.

Into Nick's brain came La Croix' thought, "I should have done it this way before. It's like opening a present you thought you knew the contents of, but finding something much better instead." Lucien's hands moved up to Nick's shoulders and lifted his torso off the bed to remove the jacket and shirt and toss them aside. He turned toward the foot of the bed and removed Nick's shoes and socks. He gave each foot a tiny tickle as he did so. It was just enough to bring a gasp from Nick and a twitch to his feet. Then Lucien turned again and this time his hands went to the waistband of Nick's trousers. He could not help it, he shuddered as La Croix' fingers opened the buttons and lowered the zipper exposing the silk boxer shorts. The bulge of his half erect penis deflated as

bad memories assaulted Nick. He shrank into himself a little, expecting anger at his adverse reaction to La Croix. Unexpectedly Nick was drawn up into a tight embrace. La Croix' large hands ran soothingly up and down his bare back.

"Not this time," La Croix murmured into the dark blond hair of his fledgling. "Only good things will happen this time," he said quietly. Never shifting his eyes from Nick's he lay him back down on the bed. He again went to the waistband, and this time, eyes still locked with Nick's he drew the slacks and shorts off together and tossed them after the shirt and jacket. The large, incredibly strong hands caressed the flesh under them in long, smooth, firm strokes.

Nick reached up timidly to touch the broad chest above him and said softly, "Wouldn't this be better if you were naked also?"

Lucien stilled a moment then said, "Absolutely". He rose, then in a blur of movement too fast for the human eye to follow he was as naked as Nick and back to his place on the bed.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Perfect," Nick replied and again reached out to caress Lucien's chest. This time no cloth came between his fingers and his master's flesh. Being able to touch helped keep the bad memories at bay. Touching brought their thoughts and emotions into focus for each other. La Croix felt Nick's decreasing wariness and growing arousal and feelings of affection. While Nick felt the fear and need for tenderness in La Croix he had never expected to find. He really did want this to be very good for them both.

Lucien leaned down and lapped at one of Nick's nipples while fingering its mate across the lightly furred chest. Nick again arched into his master's touch, eyes closing as the pleasure surged through his now willing body. Nick now knew he could accept La Croix into his body and not be hurt so he threw himself open to the pleasure Lucien's hands and mouth were giving him. He reached out to run his hand through Lucien's short hair and down onto the powerful upper back to hold him close. Nick's instincts still said he should not do anything that La Croix would consider coercion

even of the mildest sort during the sexual act. La Croix did not like that, and Nick doubted that would ever change.

Lucien had had almost two thousand years of experience in general, and nearly eight hundred years of on and off experience specifically with Nick. He began to drive Nick again and again to the very edge of orgasm, but then he would back off and allow Nick to cool down a little. He used his mouth and hands on every square inch of Nick's body till he begged for release. Barely coherent Nick gasped out, "Please, Lucien, let me come. Take me now and let me come."

Lucien could feel that Nick was on the edge of pain from the prolonged foreplay. True to his word he lifted Nick, turning him gently but firmly over onto his stomach. He then pulled two pillows down so that Nick was comfortable but definitely available with his buttocks raised enough for easy access. A cool hand descended through the crease of his behind to cup a thigh and press it gently away from its mate.

"Do you have something I could use?" La Croix asked softly.

"Lotion for my skin. Should do okay," Nick replied breathlessly, pointing to a drawer in the bathroom.

Lucien moved away only for the moment it took him to get the lubricant. When he returned to the bed Nick had spread his legs wide, and tilted his hips up in open invitation for his master's possession.

Lucien moved to kneel between Nick's legs and took a moment to admire the body laid out before him. It was a rare occurrence, worthy of appreciation. Next he took another moment to run his open hands down the smoothly muscled back. Then he moved to cup the rounded buttocks, and separated the globes to reach the entry to Nick's body that was his ultimate goal.

He took a large finger full of the lotion and placed it over the puckered entrance and slowly pushed one broad finger inside. The muscle tightened around his finger in a spasm but he pushed on in a little further. It took just that much for him to reach the prostate. He rubbed it firmly,

the muscles loosened and a lush moan came from the form under him. He added a second, then a third finger, widening the opening till it could take his cock without much discomfort.

When Lucien removed his fingers to replace them with his now painfully hard cock, Nick gave a small sound of protest. But then as he felt La Croix' large cock press against his anus, he tensed slightly.

Lucien paused a moment to rub soothingly up Nick's back and murmur, "No pain, just pleasure."

At this reassurance Nick was able to relax and let his master's cock slowly enter his body. The moment of discomfort as La Croix breached the muscle ring at the entry to his rectum was brief. Then he felt the stretching as Lucien's cock slid fully into him. A deliberate shift in the angle of entry made a good deal of the length slide firmly over Nick's prostate. It felt so good, he could not help but push back to meet La Croix' next slow thrust.

It did not take long for Nick to beg for "more" and "faster" and Lucien obliged. The slap of flesh on flesh was loud in the otherwise quiet room. Only the moans and inarticulate phrases as the two lovers, and this time they were lovers, strove for climax were softly spoken.

Finally Nick could take no more of the assault on his prostate and with a wild cry he came. The spasms raced through the muscles of his rectum rhythmically squeezing Lucien's cock. That was too much for Lucien, and with one final, strong, thrust deep into Nick's body he also came.

Both lay quietly on the very mussed bed, their minds still as entwined as their bodies. Lucien moved first, and that was only to kiss the shoulder he was using as a pillow. He spoke softly, "My beautiful Nicholas."

As he spoke his softening penis slipped easily from the slick and now wide open entry to Nick's body. Moving off him Lucien turned Nicholas and cuddled him to his chest. Inhumanly strong arms held him cradled easily.

Nick rested in those arms almost without thought, allowing the pleasure to sing through him

in the afterglow. He looked up into his master's face. It was serene. He wished it would stay that way but he knew better than that. For the moment however he would enjoy this respite from the world and its imminent demise.

As the minutes passed he began to feel the tension seep back into the body that held him. Finally he looked up and said, "If you're going to broadcast don't you need to get to the studio?"

"Yes, I do," La Croix replied with a small smile. "And I suppose you need to get to work as well." He laid Nick back on the bed and rose to dress.

Nick sat up and said earnestly, "I am still trying to prove it isn't true. I feel that it is not true."

La Croix said nothing. He just finished dressing and left the bedroom.

Nick sighed, rose, and dressed. He then left to face his master again downstairs. From under the openwork staircase came La Croix' voice. "Which do you suppose is worse, Nicholas, to die, or to be left in a living hell? A form of life whose purpose is survival and nothing more. To exist for the sake of existing. Such bitter irony. The mortals sustain us. Their art, their laughter, their society, their blood, our eternal lives aren't worth much without them, are they?"

"So who is the more powerful in the end, the hunter or the hunted?" asked Nick.

"I don't know. Perhaps there is a power that's greater than both," replied La Croix pensively.

"And the possibility frightens you, doesn't it?" Nick's question showed a renewed antagonism.

"What kind of a god is it that can create such perversity. That can make such torture?" La Croix spat back.

Then he was gone.

The End



Blood Relations

by

- K. Ann Post -

The Raven was empty. LaCroix had closed the club early, spilling both mortals and vampires into the streets of Toronto. He walked behind the bar and selected a bottle, a special vintage of wine and blood. As he poured the liquid into a glass, LaCroix reflected on his long life. Two-thousand years of choices made, some wise, others regretted. But he never regretted destroying Divia. Or trying to.

LaCroix sighed, rubbing his eyes. He was exhausted. Since Divia had returned, LaCroix had spent many hours soothing the vampire community. He reassured his restless patrons that he'd resolve his personal dispute with Divia before the Enforcers took notice. So tonight he had closed the club early, determined to end Divia's reign of terror within the community.

Suddenly LaCroix doubled over, clutching his chest. A fire burned there for only a moment, but the pain was devastating. Gasping, he straightened slowly. It happened again; this time a horrible pain in his bowels.

He fell from the stool and onto his knees. The pain moved from his gut and stabbed into his brain, pounding behind his eyes. LaCroix squeezed his head with his hands, moaning. Just when he thought he would lose consciousness, the pain disappeared. He grabbed the bar stool for support, but couldn't stand.

He waited anxiously, wondering if the mysterious pain would return. Except for the pain of having a stake impaled through his chest, LaCroix had no recollection of such pain before. His throat or stomach didn't burn, so LaCroix discounted poison. As his mind cleared, he concentrated on his body, trying to find any clue as to what was wrong with him.

Suddenly, the realization struck him: LaCroix couldn't sense Nicholas. The thread that linked master with fledgling was gone. Panicking, LaCroix struggled to his feet. He staggered behind the bar and grabbed the phone. He dialed Nicholas' phone number. But when he heard the ring over the line, he slammed down the

receiver. Laughing hysterically, LaCroix chastised himself.

You fool. If you've lost Nicholas' thread, then you can hardly expect the boy to be capable of answering the phone. Marvelous invention, the telephone. But no modern invention can ever replace the blood-link between vampires. Divia has destroyed him.

He stopped laughing. He picked up his glass again and drank the remaining liquid. LaCroix refilled the glass, pulled the stool closer to the bar and sat. He waited, sure that Divia would come to gloat.



Her laughter startled him, but LaCroix tried to conceal his unease. He kept his back to her, pretending to ignore her.

Divia huffed and stomped down the stairs. She stopped next to LaCroix and slammed her hand down on the bar. "Bar keep, get me a drink!"

"Get it yourself," LaCroix replied.

"Ohhh, touchy, touchy," Divia said. "I thought you'd be happy to see me, Father. After all, absence does make the heart grow fonder."

She walked behind the bar. She pulled out a bottle. "Nope," she said and dropped it. The bottle shattered and the red liquid spilled across the floor. She repeated her action, breaking bottle after bottle, yet LaCroix didn't move to stop her.

Frustrated by his inaction, Divia reached across the bar and grabbed LaCroix by his shirt. She pulled him across the polished surface and snarled in his face. "Isn't there something you want to ask me, Father?"

"Spare me your sick, little games. Destroy me and be done with it."

"This is my game and therefore, my rules. First rule is that I get to tell you a story — a story about a vampire named Nicholas. What an exquisite creature he was! I

can see why he was your favorite, Father. He suffered so beautifully as I extinguished the fire in him. Did you feel him suffer? I bet you did. Tell me, did you ever fuck him?"

LaCroix snarled and back-handed her. The blow rocked back her head, but she didn't loosen her hold on LaCroix. She licked at the blood trickling from her split lip.

"You always liked it rough, or so I heard," she said. "It's a pity you never accepted my offer, my affection. I enjoy games of both love and bondage. Instead of enjoying my ministrations, you betrayed me. Why?"

"What you offered was obscene," LaCroix hissed.

"As a human, you killed thousands on the battlefield and raped countless virgins in the ensuing victory celebrations. As a vampire, you've slaughtered hundreds of humans over the centuries. You're a creature of darkness, as evil as I. How can you be so squeamish about a little sexual pleasure?"

"As a man I cherished you — my daughter. There was never any sexual love. It was impossible for me to cherish the creature you became. I can't love you. I despise what you are because you destroyed the one pure thing that touched my life."

"Despise? That's a pretty harsh word, Father. You don't harbor even a small measure of affection for your daughter?"

"You're not my daughter; not anymore. You smothered all her goodness until there was nothing of her left. I can't love you."

"So be it. You can join your Nicholas in Hell."

Divia shoved LaCroix off the bar and he tumbled to the floor. Before he could stand, Divia jumped over the bar and landed on his back. She knocked him down and straddled his back. She grabbed LaCroix's short hair and smashed his face onto the floor. He rolled over, knocking her aside with an elbow to her stomach. Not surrendering her advantage, she kicked LaCroix in the head. He rolled away, but she pursued him. She lashed out, scratching him across his face.

He avoided her nails as she went for his eyes. LaCroix grabbed her foot, twisting hard. She shrieked as the bone snapped and she tumbled to the floor. LaCroix seized her and threw her across the bar. She landed against the mirror and it shattered against her weight. Divia fell to the floor amid huge slivers of glass. She screamed as she landed on the glass from the wine bottles she had previously broken. Writhing on the floor, she was helpless as the glass from the mirror rained across her body and sliced through her skin.

LaCroix quickly grabbed a bar stool and snapped off

a leg. He leapt over the bar and plunged the wood into Divia's chest.

"Father!" she cried.

She clawed at his legs, but LaCroix pulled away, unmoved as Divia writhed in agony. Avoiding the glass, LaCroix stepped across Divia. He reached under the bar and found Miklos' supply of matches. He lit one, then set the whole book afire.

Divia begged when she saw what he was holding. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"I'm sorry, too. If for one moment I could forget what you once were, what we once had, then I would let you live. But every moment that you remain before my eyes, you remind me of what I lost. You're human no more and I only know the vampire."

She tried to remove the stake protruding from her chest, but was too weak. "But you love me. I know you do."

"No, I never loved you. I loved Divia, my child. I never loved you, my vampire master."

He dropped the flaming match book on the ground. The flames ignited the spilled alcohol and raced along the floor. The fire quickly engulfed Divia and she screamed, beating her hands uselessly against the flames.

The fire spread to the front of the bar. It raced along the floor and up the walls. Bottles of alcohol burst under the intense heat. LaCroix leapt away from the dancing flames. The alarm and sprinkler systems activated, but LaCroix knew the fire was already out of control and would destroy the Raven. Part of the frame structure collapsed and blocked the entrance to the club. Burning chunks of the roof fell on Divia and the vampire ceased screaming. Amid the roaring inferno, LaCroix heard sirens.

As the club imploded around him, LaCroix covered his head and flew straight up. He reached the night sky and didn't look back. The fire roared on and completely engulfed the Raven.



LaCroix peered through the sky light in Nicholas' loft. The vampire was surprised the only sign of an altercation was an overturned lamp. *Divia must have taken Nicholas by surprise*, he thought. He released the latch to the opening and descended into the apartment.

He landed softly and sniffed, testing the air for the odor of burnt or decayed flesh. There was none and no hint as to what Divia might have done with Nicholas' remains.

LaCroix straightened the overturned lamp. He then

walked to the piano, the centerpiece of the loft. He ran his hand along the smooth surface and picked up the sheet music. *Ah, Nocturne in Eb Major. One of Nicholas' favorites.* He replaced the music, then went to the fireplace.

The dying embers there reminded LaCroix of all he had lost, what would never be again. He would miss Nicholas, even their fights. He couldn't simply dismiss his companion of over 800 years.

LaCroix remembered their duets from many centuries ago. He played the violin and Nicholas the piano. Those were joyous nights and their music reflected their camaraderie.

But over the years their relationship became strained and their music together ceased. Nicholas still played, but his choice of music often reflected his dark moods. LaCroix had passed many early morning hours perched on the warehouse roof listening to his fledgling play. The music Nicholas played spoke of his despair and his alienation. It saddened LaCroix, but he had returned to the loft time and time again, hopeful that the music would change one night. It never was.

His own violin remained packed away, a bitter reminder of better times.

The telephone rang, startling LaCroix. After the third ring, Nick's answering machine came on. LaCroix felt a stab of pain as he listened to his child's voice. The recording stopped and the machine beeped.

"Nick, this is Natalie. If you're there, pick up."

LaCroix's pain turned to rage. He picked up the phone and threw it across the room. *It would serve the bitch right if she never finds out what's happened, he thought. No, no. I'll tell Dr. Lambert how horribly Nicholas died and that she'll be alone for the rest of her puny human life.*

LaCroix took a calming breath. He was angry at Divia, not Doctor Lambert. Though she may have driven Nick further away from the vampire community, Natalie loved Nick and had never meant him any harm. *Better Natalie believe that Nicholas has given up his quest to be human and has simply moved on, he thought. As I shall move on.*

He went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. LaCroix threw the containers of Natalie's concoctions into the trash. Next, he grabbed the bottles of cow's blood and poured the contents into the sink. He rinsed out the bottles and stacked them on the counter.

LaCroix saw Nick's trench coat draped over the couch. He walked over and picked it up, inhaling Nicholas' lingering scent. He tucked the coat under his arm and walked to the closet. A suitcase was on the top

shelf. LaCroix pulled it down, then flew to the second level of the loft. He stepped into Nick's bedroom and stopped.

Nicholas lay on the bed.

LaCroix dropped the suitcase and the coat. He stared at the body, unable to move. Nicholas was naked, his pale body curled in a fetal position across black, silk sheets.

He went to the bed and tried to view Nicholas' body as one might view a curiosity, not one's friend and beloved. LaCroix touched Nicholas' hand. The flesh was cold, unresponsive. He saw puncture marks on Nick's throat. Wounds, really. Divia had torn the flesh, creating long tears in the skin. Blood coated Nick's mouth and dried rivulets stained his chin and neck. LaCroix saw scratches too, across Nicholas' chest. He stared at the smooth, nearly hairless chest, down the abdomen, to the groin.

He started to turn Nick onto his back, but stopped. He saw something protruding from Nicholas' body. Divia had shoved a wooden stake into Nicholas' rectum. LaCroix touched the black sheets, feeling a dampness. When he pulled his hand away, it was covered with blood.

Shaking, LaCroix went into the bathroom. He washed his hands and splashed some water on his face, pretending he was unaffected by the macabre scene in the bedroom. The facade didn't last long. He burst into tears. He sank to the tile floor and sobbed, blood tears streaming down his face.

He felt helpless as waves of grief engulfed him. Divia had won in the end, destroying the one thing that LaCroix cherished above all others. Just when he and Nicholas had reconciled, Divia had snatched it all away.

Finally, his tears stopped. Sniffing and wiping at his face, LaCroix stood and found a washcloth. He turned on the faucet and rinsed his face. His shirt was stained with blood, so he took it off. LaCroix knew before the night was through that most of his clothes would be ruined. Even if the clothes were salvageable, he wouldn't want to keep anything that reminded him of this night. Grabbing a towel, LaCroix returned to the bedroom.

Steeling himself, LaCroix sat on the edge of the bed. He wanted to bathe Nicholas' body, but first, remove the obscene stake. Hesitantly, LaCroix touched Nicholas' thigh.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. So sorry."

He placed his hands on the wood. Taking a deep breath, LaCroix yanked the stake from Nicholas' body. He dropped the stake and fell off the bed as Nick screamed. Horrified, LaCroix scrambled away from the

bed until he slammed against the wall and could go no further.

LaCroix couldn't sense anything from Nicholas. There was no thread linking them, but Nicholas's shrieking proved that he had survived Divia's assault. LaCroix stood and approached the bed.

Nicholas quit screaming, but growled as LaCroix approached. LaCroix touched his forehead. Nicholas shied away from the touch and his eyes rolled wildly, yellow and mad.

"Shhh, it's okay," LaCroix whispered. He touched Nick's hand, squeezing it gently. "It's over now. She's gone. Divia's gone now."

He sat on the edge of the bed. He held Nick's hand, whispering nonsense. Avoiding the wounds, LaCroix caressed Nick's neck, trying to reassure. Nicholas calmed, though his ragged breathing betrayed his fear. His lips were drawn back from his fangs and his glowing eyes watched LaCroix warily.

LaCroix knew Nicholas was in desperate need of blood. The cow's blood would have helped and LaCroix cursed himself for discarding it so carelessly.

"Nicholas, I'm going to move you."

Nick lunged from the bed and knocked LaCroix to the floor. Nick leapt from the bed and landed on top of his master. They bumped heads and LaCroix cursed. Nick tried to grab LaCroix's head, but LaCroix held Nick's hands away from his face.

"Lucien, where are you?" Nicholas cried.

LaCroix was confused. "I'm here."

"No, no. You're not here." Nicholas attempted to free himself from LaCroix's grip. Failing, he rested his head on his master's chest, breathing hard. "I can't feel you," he rasped. "I'm alone."

LaCroix cuddled him. "I'm here. Our link is gone, but I assure you that I'm with you." Though appalled by Nick's weakened condition, he was pleased Nicholas was disturbed by the loss of their blood-link. He continued to rub Nick's back, lulling him to sleep.

Once he felt Nick relax, LaCroix shifted Nicholas in his arms. He stood, then laid Nick gently on the bed. He returned to the bathroom, cleaning up what he could and retrieving his shirt. He glanced at Nick, then he went to the hall closet, pulling out some blankets. He returned to the bedroom.

Nick hadn't moved. LaCroix wrapped Nicholas in the blankets and lifted him. At the doorway, he paused, wondering if he should destroy the loft as he had destroyed the Raven.

Would Nicholas ever want to return to this place, he wondered. Once a place of refuge, now a place of horrific

memories? LaCroix didn't know, but believed Nicholas should make the decision once he recovered.

Clutching Nicholas tightly in his arms, LaCroix levitated and ascended to the sky light. He cleared the roof and flew into the night sky, seeking sanctuary for himself and his wounded son.



LaCroix sat in a chair and stared at the fire in the fireplace. Heavy curtains blocked the afternoon sun. Nicholas and Janette were upstairs sleeping. Nicholas was still recovering and took comfort from the physical contact that LaCroix and Janette could provide.

Janette had arrived in Toronto two nights after Divia's attack, fearing the worst when her link with Nicholas failed. Finding the Raven destroyed and Nicholas gone, Janette had come to LaCroix's estate.

LaCroix and Janette no longer shared a blood-link, but he still thought of Janette as his daughter. He was glad she came. He was also relieved to know she held no ill will against Nicholas for bringing her back across: perhaps destroying her one chance for mortality.

Janette had not only tended Nicholas, but had also acted as liaison with both vampires and mortals. She soothed the vampires, reassuring them the danger was past and that the Raven would be rebuilt. Janette also spoke with the police and arson investigators, appearing as the distraught ex-proprietor of the club and cooperating fully.

Though LaCroix objected, she had also called Doctor Lambert. Janette learned from Natalie that Detective Nick Knight was listed as missing. The police had descended on his apartment, scouring the place for clues.

Nick's partner Tracy Vetter was investigating, determined to stay on the case despite her grief over Vachon's death. Natalie wanted to see Nick, had begged, but Janette wouldn't give the location of LaCroix's estate. She had assured Natalie they would care for Nick and when he was better, would call her.

And Nick was getting better. When LaCroix had offered him human blood, Nick didn't refuse it. He consumed massive quantities and his body had healed quickly. He slept a lot, cuddled next to Janette or LaCroix. LaCroix was relieved that Nick's rest was peaceful and that the specter of Divia was not haunting his dreams. Yet their blood-link remained dormant.

LaCroix didn't know how Divia had severed their link. The thread was gone, not concealed as some master vampires could do. Nicholas had described to LaCroix the incredible pain in his mind when she had attacked

him. After that, Nick felt nothing but the joy Divia took in torturing him. LaCroix remembered the pain too and ached for his son.

LaCroix stood and stretched. He picked up the poker and stoked the logs, causing the flames to spit and swell. The quiet of the house soothed him. For the first time in decades, he felt truly happy. His two favorite children were with him, living under the same roof, peacefully.

He regretted that Divia had brought them such pain in the process. Vachon and Urs were destroyed, but as long as Nick continued to recover, LaCroix could rejoice.

He stared at his violin on the mantel above the fireplace. LaCroix had unpacked it a few nights ago, cleaned and polished it. The Stradivarius beckoned him; it called for him to express his happiness. He picked it up.

He plucked the strings, testing their sound. He placed his fingers against the neck of the instrument, then dragged the bow across the strings. Though he hadn't played in years, the music was perfect.

LaCroix was swept away with the music. The notes came easily. He didn't know how long he played. When he stopped, he saw Nicholas sitting on the stairs.

"Did I disturb you?"

Nick shook his head. "Your music could never be called disturbing. I haven't heard you play in ages. It was wonderful."

"I haven't felt like playing in ages," LaCroix admitted. "How do you feel?"

"Better, but..."

LaCroix replaced the violin on the mantel. "Are you still in pain?"

Nick shook his head.

"Ah, our link. The loss of it troubles you?"

"I'm alone, LaCroix. I can't feel you or Janette."

Frustrated, Nick stood from the stairs and went to the fireplace. "I've always wanted to be free. Free from you, Janette, my vampirism. But I didn't know it would feel like this — so lonely."

LaCroix hesitantly touched Nick's arm, then ran his hand up to Nick's neck. Only a few nights ago, the flesh was torn. Tonight, the pale skin was perfect. His thumb traced Nick's jawline, caressing the smooth skin.

Nick kissed LaCroix's palm. "Even when we fought, you were there. Your presence has always been with me. I never realized how much I relied on it."

"Well, after 800 years you take things for granted."

Nick chuckled. "Are you saying I'm selfish?"

"Most certainly. But I adore you anyway." LaCroix gasped and yanked his hand back from Nick's face. He turned away, wishing he could take back the words. He

considered his love for Nicholas a weakness. Divia had used it against him; maybe others would try, including Nicholas.

"How can you love me?" Nick asked. "I've been a disappointment to you — never the companion you desired. I know you've never cared what others think, but because of me other vampires avoid you. They laugh at us both. Me, because of my desire to be human again and you, because you indulge me. Because of my quest for mortality, I've brought you under close scrutiny by the Enforcers. When I'm not ignoring you, I'm fighting you. My God, I even tried to kill you! Love me? You should hate me."

"Stop it, Nicholas," LaCroix said. "We've both said things, done things, that we regret. We can't change our past, only build a future for ourselves. And not all the times were bad. I remember this," LaCroix touched the violin on the mantel. The echo of the music still ringing in his ears.

Nicholas' hand reached up and covered LaCroix's. "My memories aren't as clear as yours. There is so much I'm still missing. Tell me what else you remember, Lucien."

LaCroix stared into Nick's blue eyes. He saw the desire reflected there, a desire LaCroix hadn't seen since the night Nicholas had come to him at the Raven, seeking information about his past.

The damage from the gunshot wound had left Nick unsure of his identity. He had come to LaCroix for answers. He spent the entire day, listening to LaCroix detail his vampire life. And as the moon had risen in the Toronto night sky, they had renewed their ties, making love for the first time in over a hundred years.

That night had been a turning point. LaCroix hoped to recapture that time.

"I remember your lips, how soft they are," LaCroix leaned close and brushed his lips against Nick's. He nibbled gently, tugging on the delicate flesh until Nick parted his lips. LaCroix's tongue darted inside, licking the teeth and feeling them descend and sharpen.

Nicholas moaned. "Tell me more," he said.

"I'll show you," LaCroix said and pulled Nicholas to lay with him on the carpet.

LaCroix opened Nick's robe, sliding the silk from pale shoulders. The flames from the fireplace cast Nick's skin in a golden light, matching his golden hair.

"So beautiful," LaCroix murmured, running his hand across the smooth skin. The marred skin from a few nights ago was only a dark memory that LaCroix would lock away forever.

He kissed Nick again, savoring the taste and texture

of his lips. Reluctantly, he left Nick's mouth and kissed a path down Nick's chin, pausing to bite playfully at the exposed throat. He licked down to Nick's chest. The nipples were hard, already raised in excited, little peaks. LaCroix grasped the left nipple with his teeth, tugging lightly, then ran his tongue across the nub of flesh.

Nick pulled LaCroix's head closer, encouraging him to increase the stimulation.

"Patience," LaCroix said and shook off Nick's grip. He continued exploring. He blew on the nipple and bit it again. His tongue lapped at the small drop of blood that appeared and he licked the nipple in apology.

Leaving the sensitive nipple, he ran his tongue down Nick's stomach, licking at the light sheen of blood sweat that formed on Nick's skin. Nick's abdominal muscles bulged in impressive waves, forming the perfect stomach that mortals so desperately desired on their own imperfect bodies.

He blew on the skin, parting the fine dusting of hair that began below Nick's belly button. He paused, ducking his nose in the small hole. Nick laughed, pushing LaCroix away.

"Stop it! You know I'm ticklish."

"Yes, I know you are. Some things never change."

LaCroix left the belly button and licked the line of public hair that formed a path to Nick's groin.

Nick's penis was erect, the testicles drawn close to the body in anticipation of orgasm. LaCroix went down on the flesh, sucking and teasing the tight foreskin. Nicholas arched his back and spread his thighs wide. LaCroix's tongue slid across the skin and teased the head, while his hands fondled Nick's testicles.

"Oh, oh," Nick said. Fighting the urge to grab LaCroix's head again to control the angle, Nick twisted his hands helplessly into the carpet. Crying out in frustration, he grabbed the back of LaCroix's shirt. He tore the fabric, exposing LaCroix's skin. Nick tried to bite LaCroix's neck, but LaCroix restrained him.

Laughing, LaCroix released Nick's cock and tangled his fingers in Nick's hair. He pulled Nick's head back, arching his fledgling's neck in a vulnerable display. With his other hand, he continued to fondle Nick's balls.

"I want you," LaCroix said. His eyes were golden and his fangs descended. He pulled on Nick's scrotum, feeling the balls tighten even more as orgasm was delayed yet again. Leaving the testicles, LaCroix fingered Nick's tight foreskin. Teasing the skin, he rubbed his thumb across the head, eliciting a cry from Nicholas. "I need you."

He bit Nicholas' neck and sucked eagerly. Nick's blood tasted sweet, if a bit cool. LaCroix could feel

Nick's heartbeat, his human life, with every swallow of blood. He couldn't stop; the taste of Nick's blood sang to LaCroix and shattered his control.

Memories flooded his consciousness, but they weren't his memories. He saw himself through Nick's eyes. How Nicholas saw him that first night when LaCroix had brought him across. How Nicholas saw him as a father; as a teacher; then later, companion and lover. He sucked harder on the skin, trying to hold onto the sweet memories.

Suddenly, the thoughts stopped. LaCroix pulled back in astonishment. He rested his head on Nick's chest. He couldn't hear a heartbeat. Nick's chest didn't rise to take in a breath. LaCroix cried out and shook Nick's shoulders. Nick didn't respond. Frantic, LaCroix yelled, "Nicholas!"

His cry awoke Janette. She left the bedroom and swooped down the staircase. She knelt at LaCroix's side and placed her hand on Nick's chest. "What happened?"

"Can't you see?" LaCroix asked as he stared at the prone, lifeless figure on the carpet. "I've killed him. I don't know how, but I've destroyed him!"

Janette looked at her former master. "Think, LaCroix. You couldn't have killed Nicholas. That's not possible. He's been dead for over 800 years. Taking his blood should have been a renewal of life, not death."

"Divia. This is her doing. She made Nicholas weak; she changed him in some way I don't understand."

"No, I can't believe that. Don't let her win. Call Nicholas back, bring him back across."

LaCroix stared at Janette. "What do you mean?"

"Call to him, Lucien. Nicholas is on the edge again, like he was 800 years ago. He stands near the abyss between life and death. Lure him back. Steal him back from the light."

LaCroix picked up Nick's hand. The hand was limp and the pale skin cool to the touch. LaCroix drew it to his face and kissed the palm. He didn't speak; he appealed mentally to any remaining awareness in Nicholas' soul. He concentrated on his love for Nicholas.

Tears streamed down LaCroix's face. Only Nicholas had ever caused him to weep. Only Nicholas caused LaCroix such joy one moment, then such sorrow the next. For LaCroix to lose something so precious, so unattainable, was unbearable.

He bit his right wrist and made a fist. Blood spurted from the wound and dripped down LaCroix's arm. With his left hand, he held Nick's chin and forced his mouth open. LaCroix held his bleeding wrist above Nick's mouth.

"Drink," he whispered. "Drink."

The blood dripped into Nick's mouth. LaCroix laughed in relief as Nicholas coughed, then swallowed. He had little time for further reaction as Nick seized his wrist and bit into the flesh.

LaCroix encouraged Nick to feed, coaxing Nick into his lap. He closed his eyes and cuddled Nick in his arms. He relaxed, savoring the rebirth of their blood bond. LaCroix felt Nicholas' burning hunger and his returning vampire strength. LaCroix's ancient blood had cured the psychic damage Divia had inflicted.

LaCroix met Janette's gaze. He held out his hand. Janette placed her hand in his, joining the three vampires together.

"Do you feel it? Do you feel him?" LaCroix asked.

Janette shook her head. "Perhaps if Nicholah and I shared blood, our link will return as well?"

"Do you wish for this? Nicholas misses you, but understands your desire to be free of him. He'd accept your decision if you choose not to renew blood ties."

"How do you know this? Nicholah is one of the most selfish creatures I've ever known."

LaCroix laughed. "That he is."

He released her hand and traced the smooth skin along her face. "I know his soul. He loves us both, Janette."

She stood. "I need time to think. Please call me if Nicholah needs me. Or if you do." She tried to walk away, but LaCroix grabbed her hand again.

"No, please stay. If not for Nicholas, then for me. I should have said this centuries ago, Janette. I need you too. I want you to stay."

Janette squeezed his hand in reassurance. She sat next to him on the floor, her hand resting on LaCroix's knee.

LaCroix turned his attention back to Nicholas.

The younger vampire lay quietly in LaCroix's arms. He smiled sheepishly and licked LaCroix's torn flesh in apology. "Did I hurt you?"

LaCroix shook his head. He examined his wrist and saw the wound was already healing.

"The question is, Nicholas, how do you feel?"

Nick thought for appropriate words. "Alive, truly alive. I don't understand what happened, but it seems you saved me once again."

The master vampire chuckled. "You never learn. You're so quick to either bestow credit or lay blame at my feet. You chose this; you chose to come across to me, to us."

Nicholas looked at Janette. "Will you forgive me?"

She smiled. "Give me time, Nicholah."

Janette laughed at his frown. "Don't fret so. Time is

the one thing we have in abundance."

LaCroix gave Nick a slight shove and pushed him out of his lap. "I'm overjoyed by your return to the fold, but that doesn't disguise the fact that you're heavy. Get up."

With some help from LaCroix and Janette, Nick stood. LaCroix pulled a blanket from the back of the couch and draped it across Nick's shoulders. He wrapped one arm across Nick's body and took Janette's hand with the other. He joined their hands just above Nicholas' groin.

Yes, LaCroix thought, they had all the time any vampire could ask for.

The End

Q Q



Waiting and Watching

by

- Natasha Barry -

LaCroix first spied the boy from a distance. Only it was not a boy, he was soon to discern, having ventured closer. The well-built blond was on the road, traveling the streets of the town, accompanying his companions, yet somehow separate. It was that indefinable air of individualism which at first caught the roaming vampire's attention: What was different about this boy?

The night was still early, the hunt could be resumed. Why not wait, watch, and follow for a bit?

Without surprise, LaCroix soon witnessed the splintering of the trio, the one, the dark blond he favored, making his way toward the right, while his fellows, a little too coarse and gangly, veered to the left. A casual wave of the arm, and they parted. Perhaps only momentary companions? Company mutually agreed upon to provide defense along the road?

Frowning, LaCroix knew he could take this one, now he was on his own. In truth, he could have taken him with the others, one at a time. His strength was more than equal to holding them at will. But the hunt was forgotten with the sight of this new creature, and so his appetite — for blood — was abated. This new appetite, one of flame, LaCroix gently stoked. It was a rare vintage for him to experience, to be sure. And now he needed to investigate, to determine further, why this one young soldier among so many would have aroused him.

Now the soldier was holding a bundle of clothing in one hand, probably all of his possessions dangling from one wrist, and a horse's reins from the other. The nameless one had some property, then, or at least was of good family. Gentle breeding was very important to Lucien LaCroix, the former Roman general called Lucius. So the young soldier was

likely a knight. Even better.

Wanting a closer look at his prey, LaCroix casually approached, halting suddenly as the young knight veered off in a new direction, tethering his horse at the front of a crass building. Loathe to venture too near the prey as yet, LaCroix did not follow, but lingered several abodes further down.

Application of his superior vampire senses was unnecessary, for LaCroix was picking up the smell of cooked meat, easily discerned from this distance. So, the young one was set to dine.

Waiting was something a Roman officer did quite easily.

While he paced, LaCroix considered when he would pounce. A plan formed in his mind, and a small smile appeared on his face, as he thought on how long he'd keep this fish gasping for air. Should he hold the knight a few days, or perhaps, only two? He looked a sturdy lad, but how long would it take for LaCroix, jaded former veteran of brothels he was, to grow tired of that face, that form? How long would it take to quench his thirst of this attraction? How strong was the sturdy looking youth, in fact, though he was seemingly well built?

These delectable musings kept LaCroix occupied far longer than he'd thought, and when the door opened a combination of moonlight from above and candlelight from below illuminated the clean features of the unshaven knight, baking the golden halo of hair into a nimbus of light.

LaCroix, having been born and bred prior to the Christian era, and hence personally acquainted with the concept of classical beauty, found himself stunned at seeing that concept living and breathing on this sad, unkempt and barren street. The knight was one of those Greek statues Romans, first among those left of this world, admired. Something to be

attained and acquired, and standing not too distant still.

What truths would the shedding of the clothes reveal? The gods couldn't be so cruel as to devise such a face, yet mar the form.

As with his daughter Janette, whom LaCroix rescued from a life of whoring and early death, he saw this rare beauty and knew it must not be left for decay. He'd sired a fair litter of daughters and sons, each more stunning — the examples of his rising standards — than the last. Janette was the latest, his loyal daughter now, for many years. This one? That remained to be seen, but for now: "You are divine," he whispered, too far away for any but vampire ears to hear. And there were none of those about. LaCroix would have felt an emotion he would struggle to recognize — embarrassment — if there were.

What was this prospective son called? LaCroix would investigate. If this golden one had attributes other than physical beauty, he would be well worth cultivating for more than amusement's sake.

So this night, as on coming nights, LaCroix followed from a distance, marking the young knight's territory, his preferences for food, drink and women — no male dalliances.

Then, following the young knight home, LaCroix would fly to a spot in a tree, from which he could watch, through the balcony, as the pale muscled body was bathed before donning a diaphanous gown with which to rest the remainder of the night in.

Now, for the first time, LaCroix understood the overwhelming compulsion of David over Bathsheba, the famed Hebrew's weakness for that beauty which had continued upon possession of it. This urge to covet, LaCroix previously scorned. Beauty was common enough, had been the Roman's previous philosophy, and could be found most everywhere. But now, with this example before him affecting him as no other before, LaCroix understood the value Helen of Troy must have held to many, and how a face could so enrapture one. Uncommon beauty was to be recognized and prized above all. Wasn't that one of the lessons the Romans were supposed to have acquired from the Greeks?

Though the face of the young knight, Nicolas de Brabant, was revealed to be older than he'd first taken him for — repeated viewings having shown some fine lines in the forehead, perhaps caused by

weariness or the stress of recent toil — the maturing of the youth only caused him to be of more value to LaCroix, not less. The knight was in his late twenties, perhaps, not a boy any longer, but highly experienced in fighting and seeking sexual pleasure, a soldier an old Roman could respect. And yet the knight maintained a relaxed air of sociability in his interactions with others, of innocence in his expression... These disparate traits LaCroix pondered over. The inconsistencies were of far greater interest than some untried youth would have been, one who could be molded quite easily into whatever design LaCroix saw fit. de Brabant would come to him as someone strong, a man experienced, who knew something of life, with carefully considered values... A knight; someone who valued the finer qualities of life and living. That was the kind of character LaCroix would find valuable in a companion.

While LaCroix had been taking note of the face and the character, and making his own educated guesses and estimates, the rest of the body hadn't escaped his keen eye. The knight was well-formed, setting LaCroix's remaining concern to rest. The muscles, LaCroix judged, to be easily taut, and the body nearly hairless, a preference Roman citizens were tutored in. The genitals, LaCroix expertly noted, were of a size fitting the form and build, neither too large nor too small, though LaCroix recollected the Greeks favored small genitalia as the smaller penis was believed to be more potent. LaCroix, however, was Roman, and Romans felt the Greeks couldn't be correct about everything, if small genitalia was their prime example of male potency. In their own rare nude portrayals, Romans rectified the mistakes of nature, bestowing endowments the gods hadn't seen fit to.

LaCroix was quite pleased his Nicolas had nothing to be ashamed of, and was therefore exemplifying LaCroix's ideal of male perfection.

Additionally, there were no noticeable birth marks, blemishes or scars to spoil this fantasy come to life. In truth, this young knight must have been blessed to survive his years in the Crusades without a scratch of a blade to mar that excellent skin. If only Alexander the Great could have done as well, what else could the Greek have accomplished?

For all this viewing of his new interest, this protégé, LaCroix was very careful never to be seen.

Sometimes, occasionally, LaCroix could sense or see the young knight feeling ill at ease or discomfited. Being under surveillance as he was, it was inevitable he should feel the lance of a hot or measuring gaze. But LaCroix, many years the strategist and the hunter, knew full well to sense his prey. He'd pull back, just in time to avoid being seen. What was he, except a flash in the sky, the movement of a branch, the shadow upon the wall? And the young knight, perhaps accustomed to drawing stares with his youthful beauty, would be seen by LaCroix to shrug off that nagging feeling which occasionally overcame him.

A few times, venturing very near while the young knight slept, LaCroix appeared near the bedside. The fire, remaining lit through the night, always gave such a warm sensual glow to the room, it was an invitation to linger, and the amber of the young knight's skin was warmer still.

LaCroix would look down into the handsome face, wondering, quite often now, what the exact color of the eyes would be, and, when they finally awakened to him, what would they see when they did? Savior? Lover? Terror?

It was more than coveting a work of art; an object of beauty. LaCroix was far too wise, and far too experienced in the ways of the world, to fall into that trap. Somehow, even without a direct word between them, or even the young knight's looking directly upon the face of this creature enraptured by him, LaCroix's mind and heart were captured forever.

LaCroix hated it, this feeling his fate was inextricably bound to this one without knowledge of him, but mostly he savored it. For the first time in all his hundreds of years, he felt he had a purpose for existing, besides an increase in knowledge or power. He wanted this young man, but he wanted the young man to want him, as well. And want would become need, or perhaps already was.

He wouldn't — yet — use the word to himself: love.

But there were more pragmatic details to be labored first, leaving behind the future for the present. From what he'd seen of this young man — older than he'd first mistaken him for from a distance, more set in his ways, perhaps — LaCroix was not so foolish as to deny the rare occasion — to himself — of when he might need assistance.

Janette, never secure enough to be too far from his side, was at a distance with which he could reach her within the space of a single night. After five nights of watching this new dove he hoped to take under his wing, LaCroix felt confident Nicolas would not be on his way too quickly. The knight was too settled, still, to be intent on continuing a journey in the next day or so. But, gathering momentum, for there may not be many days to spare, LaCroix made a hurried kill for sustenance and was on his way, flying with the evening chill.

LaCroix never saw a man alive who could resist the charm of his favorite daughter, Janette, and Nicolas wasn't near enough discriminating about the female persuasion anyway, judging by the frequent bussing and thigh slapping of barmaids who'd seen better days, as LaCroix had been witness to. Quite revolting a spectacle, really. But the knight would be educated, under his tutelage, into more appropriate behavior. The influence of this time period, a very crude one, was to blame, that was all.

Because of the knight's singular lack of discrimination, the abundance of Janette would no doubt be wasted, but in an old general's experience, it was never wise taking your adversary for granted: There were too many ways in which one could be unpleasantly surprised. Janette would be the perfect lure, far too beautiful and enticing not to have a heady affect upon the young knight, thereby instigating the successful seduction of Nicolas into exactly where LaCroix desired him to be.

The next move, as always, would be LaCroix's.

The End



The Taste of Rain

by

- Tippi Blebins -

Thunder clouds rolled into the city at dusk, swallowing what remained of the light like an ethereal sea devouring a flaming ship.

LaCroix watched the last of the Raven's patrons leave before picking up the phone. He dialed a number he'd never had occasion to call, but had memorized nonetheless.

A few rings later, a familiar voice answered. "Knight here."

"Nicholas."

"LaCroix?" came the startled query. "What do you want?"

"To talk," he said.

A pause, and then: "Well?"

"Not on the phone," he said. "Meet me outside the club in twenty minutes."

"Outside? LaCroix, it's raining."

"Of course, it's raining," he said a little irritably. "Will you come or not? The sun will be up soon."

Nicholas sighed audibly. "Fine. I'll be there."

LaCroix set the phone down and pulled on his coat. The storm was picking up. The rain sounded like war as it beat against the building. He went to the door and opened it a few inches to survey the sky outside. Even this close to dawn, it was still dark out. A stray drop of rain landed on his lip and he licked it away out of reflex.

Funny how the littlest thing, like the taste of rain, could bring back old memories...



1821

"Come inside," he called out from the drawing

room. "Stop brooding out in the rain. Or at least shut the doors; my Persian rug is getting wet."

Nicholas made no move to indicate he had heard him. He stood between the two potted boxwoods, head bowed and hair soaked into bronze-colored ringlets. Beyond him the hedge maze shuddered in a sudden gust of wind.

LaCroix sighed and turned toward the fire with an ornate iron poker in hand. His dealings with Nicholas had been tense since Janette's departure. They hardly spoke now except to snap at one another. Usually, though, they spent their days and nights in silence, hardly even glancing at one another.

Lightning flashed not too far in the distance, flooding the room with bright blue light. LaCroix glanced out the doors, but Nicholas was gone. He stilled his senses and let their unique bond betray his son's whereabouts.

Closing his eyes, he could almost feel the waxy texture of leaves beneath his fingers; it was like recalling a memory not quite his own. He felt rain — or remembered feeling rain — on his skin. He was cold. *Nicholas* was cold.

Rain be damned, he thought, and dropped the poker onto the hearth. He ventured out into the storm.

A quick pass over the grounds revealed Nicholas' position near the fountain in the center of the hedge maze. He landed beside him. "Come back inside," he said. He suppressed an urge to run the tips of his fingers under the other man's chin where the rain was pouring in a silvery rivulet. He curled his fingers into fists to avoid temptation.

"I have to know," Nicholas said suddenly. "Did you send her away?"

LaCroix had known this conversation was coming for some days now. "This is ridiculous, Nicholas," he spat. "We are standing in the rain like fools!"

"Did you send her away?" the younger one repeated. Raindrops beaded his lashes; he blinked and two miniature chandeliers crashed to his cheeks.

LaCroix looked away. "And if I did?"

"If you did, then I want to know why," Nicholas said. "I have to know."

"No," he finally said, meeting Nicholas' gaze. Something in his throat tightened, but he choked it back. "She left of her own will. I did not send her away."

For a moment, he thought Nicholas looked genuinely disappointed. But no, he must have imagined that.

"She's grown tired of us?" Nicholas asked, then added bitterly: "Of me?"

LaCroix said nothing for a long while. He wanted to reach out and lay a hand on the other man's shoulder. How difficult would it be to console him, comfort him? How hard would it be to admit his own pain? But more than flashes of light and driving rain separated them. Finally: "Come inside. I won't have you making a spectacle of yourself in the rain."

"Tell me!" the other roared.

He lunged and grabbed Nicholas by the shoulders before he could stop himself. They fell to the wet leaves, arms and legs tangled. His breath came in ragged gasps as he pulled back to survey the younger one's startled face. A flash of lightning illuminated his eyes, opening the pupils into windows in which he saw himself reflected.

He gathered himself together and got shakily to his knees. "Perhaps," he said quietly, "you should be thankful for those who *do* choose to remain at your side. For whatever reason."

He started to stand, but a hand closed on his wrist. "I am thankful."

Nicholas rose up slightly at the same time he

pulled LaCroix toward him. "Nicholas...."

Whatever else he'd planned to say was lost in a sudden and unexpected kiss. He braced one hand against the cold wet ground and held onto Nicholas' shoulder with the other. He drew back, stunned.

Lightning laced the sky. "What's the matter?" Nicholas asked.

Tell him the truth, his mind whispered. Tell him what really happened. Tell your precious favorite why Janette *really* left.

LaCroix shook his head, traced the other's lips with his thumb. "Nothing," he finally said.

"I am thankful for your company," Nicholas said, slipping his palm over the nape of LaCroix's neck. "You are never the one to leave. You have never left me." His voice was quiet with the wonder of this revelation.

"And I never will," LaCroix said, his voice a little rough.

"Not that there aren't times I wish you'd leave me alone," Nicholas said with a crooked grin.

"Is this one of those times?" he heard himself ask.

The younger vampire shook his head, his expression serious again. "No," he said. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

LaCroix got to his feet and held his hand out. "Then come inside with me."

Nicholas slipped his fingers into his, and LaCroix pulled him to his feet. He slipped one arm around the younger man's waist and led him inside.

"You're cold," he remarked, pressing his lips to Nicholas' neck as they walked. The skin tasted faintly of leather and rain.

"I'm always cold," the other chuckled. "And so are you."

"Not true," LaCroix said, adopting Nicholas' light tone. "After we feed, and the warmth of the blood infuses us, we are not cold. There are other times, as well..."

Nicholas stopped in the drawing room and grasped him about the waist, jerking him close. "Oh? And to what other times would you be

referring, I wonder?"

He ran his hands slowly along the other's sides. "If you don't remember, perhaps I should remind you...."

"Please do," Nicholas invited him.

LaCroix grasped the other's face in his hands and kissed him roughly, hungrily. He nipped at the sweet lower lip and sucked at the delicate salt that welled up. He heard Nicholas give a soft little animal grunt of pleasure. The sound served to heighten his own growing desire. He pulled away from the kiss and began to pull his protégé up the stairs.

"I think I'm starting to remember," Nicholas said huskily.

At the top of the stairs, LaCroix kicked open the door to his bed chamber and together they stumbled, laughing and snarling, onto the bed.

Nicholas pushed him back against the pillows. Something predatory shone in his eyes.

His hands went to Nicholas' thick, golden hair as the other moved down the length of his body. Nicholas kissed him through the fabric of his trousers, his teeth moving over cloth as his lips massaged LaCroix's groin. He drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth, his hands moving to the other man's smooth, hard shoulders.

"Lift up," Nicholas commanded, his voice thick. He did as he was told, lifting up his hips so that his trousers could be pulled down over his hips. They hurriedly peeled off their wet clothes, interrupting themselves only long enough to kiss and stroke another's gleaming bodies.

"Now," LaCroix said from between clenched teeth. "Now, Nicholas!"

Nicholas wrapped one hand around the base of LaCroix's cock, and squeezed. His fingers felt like the inside of a leather glove on his skin. He gasped to feel Nicholas slip the finger of his other hand into him, bearing inward and upward as he massaged.

"Like this?" Nicholas whispered.

LaCroix could only nod and grip the other man's shoulders tighter.

Nicholas took the head of LaCroix's cock into

his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucked. LaCroix moaned as another finger slipped into him, stroking with an alternately gentle and fierce pressure.

He was enveloped in wetness again as Nicholas slowly took more of him into his mouth. LaCroix watched as his cock disappeared into the seemingly endless mouth.

He felt a tightening low in his belly as orgasm approached. He bore up into Nicholas' mouth, forsaking tenderness. His hips rammed into the other man's face without mercy. He loved watching the length of his cock disappear again and again into that tight, slick mouth. He grabbed Nicholas' head on his last upward thrust, but the other pulled away just as the first spasm racked his body.

With a groan, LaCroix came.

Nicholas accepted the first burst of pinkish semen across his lips before once more opening his mouth to drain the last drops with the muscles of his throat.

Where orgasm signaled the culmination of desire in mortal men, it was only a prelude to the true hunger in vampires.

LaCroix felt his fangs lengthen as he grabbed Nicholas under the arms and pulled the other man toward him. Nicholas, panting, turned his head to one side. LaCroix clasped him against his own body and sank his teeth into the pliant flesh of the neck before him.

He felt his hand being lifted up, felt first Nicholas' lips, and then teeth upon his wrist. The momentary pain of penetration gave way to a fierce, shuddering pleasure. He felt the other man's body convulse in its own rapturous climax. He felt Nicholas' teeth sink deeper into his flesh, felt him sucking harder at the wound.

As he fed from Nicholas, Nicholas fed from him. The closeness, their bond, was at its most intense at that moment. He tasted mingled loneliness and fulfillment, pain and pleasure.

He pulled away, suddenly afraid of what Nicholas would taste in *him*. So many betrayals and half-truths....

Nicholas looked up at him, eyes wide, his hair matted and tangled. "Why...?"

"It's enough for now," LaCroix said. Another half-truth. "We... we have all night yet."

Nicholas nodded and settled into the crook of his arm. LaCroix held him tighter, alternately kissing the top of his head or an upheld hand.

They fell asleep to the sound of the storm outside.



The sound of his name drew him back to the present.

"LaCroix."

Nicholas stood before him, rain beading on his long black coat and in his hair. Irritation and worry fought for control of his expression.

"I told you the truth all those years ago," LaCroix said without preamble. "I didn't send Janette away."

Nicholas frowned. "So you told me then. Why are you telling me this again?"

LaCroix held up his hand. "Because it was still a lie," he said. "She still left because of me, because she knew I wanted her to. I didn't have to say a word. She always was more perceptive than you, Nicholas."

Nicholas sighed. "LaCroix, I know what happened. There are times when even you can't hide what's in your blood from me. When you're distracted, for instance."

The rain was suddenly too cold, too fierce. "How long have you known?" he asked.

"Since that rainy night, all those years ago," came the reply. The younger vampire gave a small, sad smile. "I just wanted you to *tell* me."

"You would have been angry," LaCroix said.

"Most likely," Nicholas agreed. "But I've never been able to stay angry with you for more than, oh, say, a few decades at a time. After all, you're the only one who's never left me."

They were silent for a long while as the rain continued to fall all round them. Lightning flashed and thunder echoed through the sky.

Nicholas reached out and touched the side of LaCroix's face. "Come inside," he said. "You're cold."

"I'm always cold," he said.

A small, sly smile. "Not always."

Nicholas opened the door to the Raven and propped it open with his shoulder. He held out his hand, and LaCroix stared at it for a long while before accepting it.

He felt himself smiling. "Not always," he agreed.

The End

Long Nights

On nights like these
I sit here
and watch the night pass by.

I know that you
are out there,
hunting
but not as you should hunt.

I yearn for you,
still miss your presence
at my side.
Hunting together
and reveling in the aftermath.

Your embrace, your kisses,
the taste of blood
on your lips.

Come back, Nicholas.
Come back to me.
I'm waiting,
like I've always waited for you.

07/09/96
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Act Three

by
- Ellis Ward -

The precinct station was strangely quiet in the last hour of night. The first hues of daybreak had yet to pale the eastern horizon, but none of the usual high-decibel traffic cluttered the corridors. Weaving through makeshift workstations to his desk, Nick Knight walked ahead of his partner. "Good night, Schanke," he said firmly. "Good *bye*, Schanke. Have a great vacation, Schanke. Get *out* of here, Schanke!"

"And you'll take care of the paperwork, right?" Bird-eyed with anticipation, Schanke loped after him. "You promised th—"

"I promised, and I will. Go *home*!"

"Yeah, okay." Schanke grinned inanely. "I appreciate it, Nick. You know that." Rubbing his hands together as though he were molding clay into snakes, he chortled, "Oh, boy. San Diego, here we come!"

As his partner turned round—making of the simple movement an impressively nimble dance step—Knight waved one last time and allowed himself a whole-body sigh of relief. Though he dearly loved the man, the last few days had been hell. Schanke had completely lost his ability to concentrate after their shift had begun, and, not surprisingly, had made no effort to regain it. Fearing for his partner's life in this condition, Knight had remained on edge until they could call it a day. He was looking forward to the next two weeks almost as much as Schanke was.

"Oh, there you are, Knight."

Covering a slight grimace of dread, Knight composed his features before greeting his superior. "Captain."

"Don't worry, Knight," O'Hara assured him. "I only wanted to warn you that an old friend of yours is waiting at your desk."

Knight murmured, "'Old friend?'"

"FBI Agent from the States. Ran a check on him to

be on the safe side. He's kosher."

"When did he arrive?"

"Half an hour ago. Says he came here straight from the airport. Looks like it, too."

"Alone." It was not a question.

"Yes. I told him you'd be here about now. I hope that was all right?"

Afraid that he must be radiating tension like a severed power line, Knight said lightly, "Thanks, Captain. For looking after him. Hm— There isn't a lot of paperwork, but—"

"Bring it in Wednesday."

"Wednesday?"

"See to your friend. If I need you, I'll call."

Knight exhaled audibly. He was more tired than he had realized. "Thanks."

Giving him a tiny, knowing smile, O'Hara patted Knight's shoulder. "Good morning, Detective Knight."

"Good morning, Captain." As she walked away, Knight briefly closed his eyes. It was a mistake: Images, long banished to the darkest corners of his mind, sprang into the light of consciousness. *Human heat, burning him, surrounding him; living flesh, unwillingly yielding*—Teeth clenched, Knight brought his thoughts back under control, and turned his attention to placing one foot in front of the other. As he rounded the corner to his work space, it occurred to him that San Diego would be a great place to be right now.

His visitor sat hunched forward at Knight's desk, elbows on its surface, fingers delicately but determinedly shredding a styrofoam cup into a snowy pile. His dark hair was finger combed, his face dirty with stubble and lack of sleep, and his eyes, cast down, looked as though they could barely tolerate the weight of their lashes.

"I don't trust you, Nicholas."

"Let her go, and I will—I will take him."

"You swear it?"

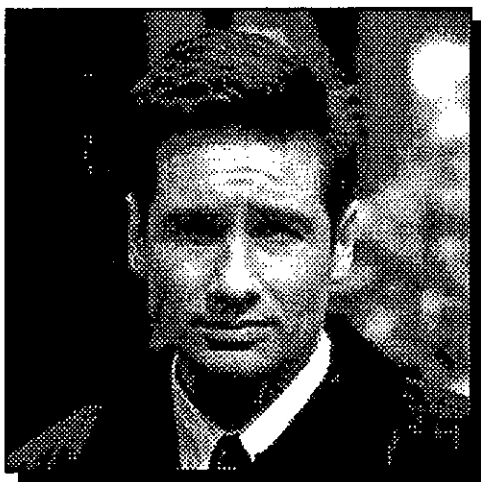
"Yes."

"Let me hear the words, Nicholas."

"I swear—that if you let her go unharmed and untouched, I will take him."

"Now?"

"Yes."



"Hello, Mulder," Knight said quietly.

The other man's head came up; his fingers stilled. Though his features were carefully controlled, in his eyes Knight detected the anguish and desperation he had dreaded, yet expected to see. "Detective Knight," he said without inflection. He reached for something inside his suit pocket; with a flick of the thumb he launched it in Knight's direction.

Knight caught it in a palm. A glance told him exactly what it was and where it had come from. He pushed the cover of the matchbook up and read the few words scrawled inside. The handwriting was known to him. "You've lost your partner again," he remarked.

"Just after midnight. In Montana—cattle mutilations."

"I told you—" Knight cut himself off. Special Agent Fox Mulder had not come all this way for a lecture. "We'll talk in the car."

Mulder rose, scooping the remains of the styrofoam cup into his hand. He emptied them into the waste-

basket under Knight's desk, then picked up two overnight bags.

"You're traveling heavier than usual." Knight led the way to the door.

"One of these belongs to Scully."

Outside, the early morning air was well past dew point, and sharply fresh. Seemingly unaffected by the temperature, Mulder strode alongside Knight, his arm brushing Knight's elbow. There were few humans of whom Knight was so aware. This close, he could almost measure Mulder's blood pressure and the rate of his heartbeat.

"There." He pointed at the Cadillac, parked in one of the few openings reserved for full-size automobiles. Hurrying his pace, he left Mulder behind, wanting some distance between them. With one hand he unlocked the trunk and raised the lid; with the other, he gestured toward the cavernous space within. Fingering the smoothed edges of the key, worn down from years of use, he went to the driver's door.

Mulder tossed the bags inside and slammed the trunk lid shut. By then Knight was waiting inside the car, his entire being thrumming. He tracked the other man's approach in the rear view mirror, then the wing mirror. For an instant, no more, he entertained the notion of starting the engine and driving away, alone. It had been his sincere hope that he would never see Fox Mulder again; lacking sufficient warning, he was utterly unprepared to deal with him now.

"Oh, Mulder, no," Scully whispered.

Her voice scarcely registered. One arm banding Mulder's chest, the other grasping his hip, Knight thrust hard into the man's body. He dared not spare a glance at LaCroix, whose dismayed amusement he sensed even from here, much less at the man's horrified partner. As the instant built, Knight shoved Mulder further forward until he was bent almost in half over the back of the plushly upholstered chair to which he clung. Hooking an arm round Mulder's throat, Knight tore open the collar of the agent's shirt.

"Mulder!" Scully cried out. She struggled frantically, and uselessly, in LaCroix's arms.

Only then did Knight look up, predator's teeth

bared, his eyes fiercely yellow. LaCroix met his gaze, then nodded, once.

Needing the entirety of his will at his command at that moment, Knight yet helplessly savored the pleasure of Mulder's body enclosing him, the delicious heat of his blood rushing frantically just below the surface of the skin. As the muscles in Knight's groin tightened, he propelled his hips forward one last time. It was an impossible moment, one he could not hope to control. Head angled toward Mulder's neck, Knight arched over him, ignoring the man's hiss of fear.

He struck, sinking his fangs deeply into yielding tissue.

LaCroix's bellowed "Nicholas!" came to him as if from a vast distance. Mulder, rigid with shock, remained immobile while Knight took his fill, the sounds of his feeding inescapable amidst the silence of the theatre.

Knight's head spun. His system rebelled at this unnatural process. Only slowly, as cool fluid trickled into his belly, did he begin to recover from the trick played upon himself. Mulder gasped as Knight raised his mouth from his own wrist then abruptly withdrew from the agent's body.

Tidying himself as unobtrusively as possible, Knight left the man and stepped into the center aisle. Lazy-eyed, LaCroix still held Scully close against his chest. The woman's face was filled with compassion; in that instant, her partner was her only concern.

"You gave your word, LaCroix," Knight said.

LaCroix's cherubic lips curved into a sweet smile. "You are endlessly inventive, Nicholas." His smile grew wider. "You cheated!"

"I said I would take him, and I did. Let her go." As he spoke, he paced purposefully toward the stage. In truth, he lacked the strength to move with any haste.

"Semantics. Shall we discuss the various definitions of 'untouched' and 'unharméd'?"

Knight extended a hand to the end of the row of seats, bracing himself. "You gave your word," he repeated.

"So I did," LaCroix agreed. And then he was gone, and with him, Scully.

Mulder shouted his partner's name. Stumbling as he straightened his clothing, he skipped-ran toward the proscenium. "Don't hurt her, you bastard!"

Head raised, Knight closed his eyes, straining to track his creator's whereabouts. Not far. He spun, then displaced to the spot he hoped he might yet catch

up with LaCroix.

In the shadows at the foot of a wide window, he spied her. Making a soft, pained sound, she lay on the floor, a hand pressed tightly to her throat. She shrank back against the wall as Knight landed before her.

Soft laughter came from seemingly nowhere. A sharp gust of frozen air blasted inward from the open window. Suspended in the darkness without, LaCroix stared coldly in at him. "This time, Nicholas. And only for you." As insubstantial as the Cheshire Cat, LaCroix disappeared.

"Mulder," Knight called, "In here!" He knelt beside the woman. Moaning under her breath, she attempted to draw away from him.

"Agent Scully," he said evenly, "I won't hurt you." "Scully!"

"Here, Mulder!" she cried out. Into the small room Mulder dashed, pinpointing his partner at once.

"Scully." He breathed her name like a benediction. A foot away, he dropped to one knee and stretched out a hand. "Oh, Scully, what did he—?"

"I'm all right," she said.

"Your neck—?"

Disgust underscoring each word, she said, "He licked me!"

"Let me see," Knight ordered. She flinched at his touch. With Mulder there, however, she did not resist him. Knight's fingers shifted her hand, lifting copper strands out of the way. He turned her head to expose the throat. The skin was clean and unbroken.

Rocking back on his heels, he pronounced wearily, "She'll be fine."

"You were in Montana," Knight prompted, reversing the Cadillac from the parking space.

"Last couple of days." Mulder turned to look at him. "Call supposedly came from the local officials. There was some concern that the ranchers' families might be in danger. We spoke to a couple of them who agreed there were rumors, but they hadn't had any trouble. Another encouraged us to stay on his land overnight."

"You left her alone at some point?"

"Call of nature." Mulder screwed up his face in self-disgust. "Couldn't've been gone more than five minutes. When I came back, she wasn't there. The matchbook from The Raven was on the seat. I never heard a thing."

"What on earth were you—?"

"Look, I know you warned me. But it happened because of what *you* did to *her*. *She* was the one who insisted we take this case. Wanted to prove to me once and for all that there's nothing behind cattle mutilations that can't be explained."

"You thought I should do it at the time." Knight nosed the car out onto the street and slowly entered the flow of traffic. In the east, night retreated before the stolid press of day.

"It bothered her," Mulder said tersely. "I thought if you took the memory of what she had seen away—If she could—" With a groan, he slumped back against the seat. "Christ, Nick." He scrubbed his face with both hands. "I don't blame you for anything. You saved our lives. Even if you had to use—" His voice dropped a note. "—unorthodox methods."

"What you did to him," Scully spoke clinically. "Is there any chance you may have transmitted your—condition?"

"It doesn't work that way." With some effort, Knight managed to meet her gaze. "But certainly he should see a doctor."

"Scully's a doctor," Mulder said uncomfortably. "And she's already seen more than she ever wanted to."

"Mulder—"

"It's okay, Scully. Better you than Skinner."

"If there was anything else I could have done, I would have," Knight said. "Unfortunately, LaCroix is strong—and he was fond of his LA children."

"Children." Mulder gave a snort. "You talk about that guy like he's not insane."

"He is not human. It does no good for you to judge him by your standards."

To Knight's acute hearing, there came a distinct sound of teeth grinding together. "You're defending a madman," Mulder said.

"I told you he would not give up." Knight slammed a foot on the brake, a split second from entering an intersection against the light. The driver of the vehicle he had almost struck shouted something through a closed window. He had no difficulty reading her lips.

"Why haven't you stopped him? Why haven't you killed him?"

The beginnings of a headache coiled behind Knight's eyes. "I have tried. Doesn't seem to take with him."

"Because he's so powerful? Or because he created *you*?"

"I don't know," Knight replied patiently. "I haven't had a lot of opportunity to experiment."

In a harsh whisper, Mulder muttered, "Of all the stuff I've researched, *vampires* had to be real." Staring out the window, he did not speak for several moments. "Will he kill her?"

"He may. You should be prepared for the possibility."

"He can't—" Mulder broke off. He steadied himself. "Will you help me?"

"Of course. But there's nothing we can do until—" The soft trill of Knight's cellular phone cut into his words. Snaking a hand into his pocket, he tugged the unit out and pressed the button to receive. "Knight." He listened to the voice at the other end, asked a very few questions, then disconnected. "That was Natalie Lambert, our Medical Examiner."

"She's found a body."

Even to his preternatural senses, Mulder's voice was almost inaudible. Knight said, "And it fits the description of your partner."

"ID?"

"None."

"Cause of death?"

"Exsanguination."

"Due to?" The question was offered perforce; there was nothing of curiosity in it.

"Stabbing and incise wounds. But Natalie found two small punctures in the throat."

"Let me guess," Mulder said calmly. "A vampire."

"She thinks so." At that Mulder let out a half-laugh of disbelief; Knight looked at him questioningly. "What?"

"Your ME *knows* about you?"

"For a long time," Knight said ruefully. He guessed Mulder's thoughts, his reaction to Natalie's news suggesting that he did not believe her patient to be his partner. And he was wise, Knight decided, to do so: LaCroix could be trusted—to a degree—to behave predictably; tormenting Mulder was within that compass. Regrettably, caprice was also part of his nature, and by that nature, there could be no safe prediction of what he would or would not do.

A short while later, the Cadillac was brought to a stop in front of the coroner's office. Knight stepped onto the pavement, keeping an eye on the horizon. He was running out of darkness.

Inside, they were greeted by Natalie Lambert's assistant, a pleasant young man in his thirties. On his way home, he gave her a quick call to verify their status, pointed them in the direction of her door, and left.

Natalie stepped from behind her desk as Knight led Mulder into the examination room which doubled as her office. "Nat," Knight greeted. "This is Special Agent Fox Mulder of the FBI. I'm afraid you may have found his partner."

Her eyes, deceptively soft and warmly brown, widened. "FBI? Why—?"

"He had a run-in with LaCroix. About a year ago."

"And you're still alive," Natalie said, impressed. "Has your partner had a hysterectomy, Agent Mulder?"

"A—? No. That is, I'm pretty sure—"

"This woman has. She's in her early forties. Five-foot-one; dyed copper-colored hair—and that was done within the last few days. Could that be your partner?"

Standing in the center of the room, Mulder made a soft, unintelligible sound.

Natalie said, "What was that, Agent Mulder?"

"You're sure? I mean—"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Sorry. Of course you are." Bending slightly forward, he petitioned, "Can I see her?"

"She's been dead for about eight hours. Do you know what to expect?"

"Better than most. Even carry my own mentholatum."

Seeing no humor in Mulder's face, Natalie briefly considered his request before waving him toward the door. "Through here."

Knight trailed behind, remaining close to the other man. He had seen the color leave his face at Natalie's first words; had seen it return almost as quickly upon hearing that the victim was unlikely his partner.

Natalie brought the body out of the refrigerator. She folded back the sheet to reveal the woman's face.

"That's not her." Mulder looked up at Knight. "But I don't think it's a coincidence that there's a resemblance." Turning back to Natalie, he asked, "May I use a pair of gloves?"

She passed the cardboard container across the table. "Help yourself."

He tugged the thin, latex sheaths over each hand. "Thank you." Drawing the sheet downward, he revealed the full extent of the woman's wounds. The body had already been thoroughly washed, so that each cut and slash, undefined by blood, formed a long, dark, elliptical pocket in the fair skin. "What can you tell us about the victim's background?"

"Virtually nothing at this point. She was found in a hotel room on the west side; not a dive. Anonymous phone call. No ID. The toxicology isn't complete, but drugs don't appear to be a factor. There were no signs of resistance, and nobody heard anything."

Mulder picked up a lifeless hand and inspected it closely. "No defense wounds?"

"None. She didn't die of these injuries, Agent Mulder."

He brought the sheet back up to the woman's shoulders, then hunched forward to study her neck. A long but shallow gash nearly concealed the real source of her death. Splaying two fingers on either side of the obscured puncture marks, he asked, "You've seen this sort of thing before?"

Natalie shot a sidelong glance at Knight before answering. "Once or twice."

"And you believe it's the result of a vampire attack?" He stood up and draped the sheet entirely over the pale form. Methodically, he stripped the gloves off his hands. His fingers were trembling.

"Unfortunately, yes." Natalie began to push the cart back toward the cooler. Knight stepped in front of her and opened the door. He helped her slide the tray inside.

"Is it LaCroix's bite pattern?"

"I believe so. But I haven't had a chance to verify that." Peeling the gloves off her own hands, she said with a hint of asperity, "Would either of you like to tell me what's going on?"

"LaCroix kidnapped his partner," Knight said. "Revenge for his involvement in the deaths of some of his people a year and a bit ago."

"You killed them?" Natalie said, surprised.

"No. He thinks I did."

She was reflectively quiet for a moment. "And this woman's death. You believe her murder has something to do with your partner's kidnapping?"

"He knew you'd determine her true cause of death. He also knew that you'd contact me the moment you did," Knight explained. "Add to that the physical characteristics, and it's hard to imagine otherwise."

"My God, Nick!" Natalie exclaimed softly. "When

are you going to do something about that maniac?!"

If Knight had not been so tired, he might have smiled. "Tell me how first. Let's go, Mulder. I need to get home."

They walked into Knight's apartment just as the first hazy rays of morning were slanting across the city. Standing well back from his windows, Knight spent a moment obliquely observing the brilliance that was forever denied him. It was with regret that he activated the blinds.

As darkness crept into each corner, Knight remembered his guest and cast about to see where he had gotten off to. He found him in front of the open refrigerator, contemplating the select contents. "See anything you like?" Knight asked.

"What is that?"

"Cow blood."

"But you prefer the human kind, right?" Mulder took a bottle off the rack and handed it to him.

"Thank you." Wrenching the cork off the top, Knight gestured toward the cupboards. "There's coffee, corn flakes, a few canned things."

"Really?"

Strolling into the living room, Knight said, "Limited, but edible." He downed half the bottle in a single, long swallow. He tried not to listen as Mulder pulled out drawers and opened cupboard doors. There came the sound of water running, of the pot scraping the electrical element on the stove, cereal spilling into a bowl. Even with his back turned, he knew precisely where Mulder was at every second.

When Mulder came into the living room and flopped down on the sofa, Knight brought the bottle to his mouth, closed his eyes, and drank until he was pulling on air. Back in the kitchen, he collected another bottle. The hunger was building within him.

LaCroix was a cunning bastard.

Head resting against the back of the sofa, legs sprawled wide, Mulder stirred the contents of his bowl. He raised his head at the last possible moment to meet the spoon, chewed without enthusiasm, then let his head fall back against the cushion. "You didn't have any milk," he informed Knight. "Had to use powdered creamer and water. Tastes like—"

"Sorry."

"Why do you have," Mulder raised the bowl in lieu of elaboration, "this kind of stuff, anyway?"

"Sometimes Natalie stops by."

"Known her long?"

"A few years now. She's a good friend."

"She must be. To cover for you like this."

Stepping over Mulder's legs, Knight sat down next to him. "Cover for me?" He rocked the bottle in a circular motion, listening to the irresistible swirl of fluid within.

"If she wanted LaCroix taken care of, she'd report the truth. But she won't, will she? She'll say that that woman died of blood loss resulting from multiple stab and cutting wounds. To protect you."

Mulder's heart was beating fast; his face was a little flushed; his body temperature was rising. Knight said, "What would you suggest? That she return a cause of death of exsanguination owing to attack by vampire? That she turn *me* in to prove vampires exist? How, Agent Mulder, will that 'take care of' LaCroix? Or are you suggesting something else?"

"You don't deny it, do you?" The challenge in Mulder's words was reflected in his angry hazel eyes. "That she's protecting you?"

Leaning nearer, Knight said, "No. I don't."

Transfixed, Mulder fell silent. *Living flesh, unwillingly yielding*— At once, Knight stood up, taking his bottles with him. "I'm going upstairs to bed. I recommend you get some rest, too." On the way he finished the second bottle and dropped it into the wastecan. His foot was on the bottommost step of the stair when Mulder said with some force, "You saw what it said inside the matchbook."

"'Twenty-four hours.' Which, from what you told me, gives us until midnight tonight."

"So you're just going to climb inside your coffin and get a little shut-eye?"

Knight hesitated. "Until LaCroix gives us something to act on, we can do nothing."

Setting the bowl, still more than half full, on the edge of the lamp table, Mulder brought himself upright. "What about visiting the place where your pal spends his days? He can't do anything to her when the sun's up, can he?"

"Agent Mulder," Knight said coolly, "you're mixing fact with fairy tale. LaCroix maintains no fixed abode. None of us knows the full extent of his abilities. And I have this little problem with sunlight." Mulder's fear and guilt were as palpable as the warmth of his blood and the softness of the skin at his throat. Knight attempted to moderate his tone of voice. "Get some sleep. Your Agent Scully will be grateful if you have all

of your wits and strength about you when the time comes."

Mulder raked his fingers through his hair. "If she's still alive."

"LaCroix knows that you will suffer much more if she is," Knight reminded him.

The mortal lay beneath him, head thrown back, breath coming in short gasps. His long fingers bit into Knight's buttocks, drawing him inside harder and deeper with each deliberate movement. Lying like this, his throat was exposed, vulnerable. Perfectly vulnerable. Thrashing, he cried out Knight's name, begging him to take him, begging him to—

"Nick, damn it, wake—I"

Erupting out of dream into reality, Knight was galvanized by an unfamiliar hand upon his shoulder, roughly shaking him. Conscious thought did not cause him to grab the other man, spin him round, and throw him onto the mattress. Nor did it dictate that he pounce upon him like a cat its prey, stunning him into immobility. Only the shocked look on Mulder's face and the gasped "No!" brought him to full awareness before he could complete the action set in motion by the vampire's instinct.

"You idiot," he snarled. He flung himself off Mulder's rigid form, backed off the bed, and unsteadily took to his feet. "Don't ever wake me like that."

For a moment Mulder seemed incapable of speech. Knight suspected he was only now recognizing all that might have happened. "Sorry," Knight apologized, and stretched out a hand to help him up. To his surprise, Mulder took it.

"Your ME called," Mulder explained, his pallor more expressive than his tone of voice. "Scully was brought in a few minutes ago."

"She—" Mulder's eerie composure struck him like a blow. "She's dead?"

"Your ME thinks so."

Suddenly Knight understood. "Another ringer?"

Leading the way to the stairs, Mulder said firmly, "It has to be. Except that this one has all of Scully's personal effects, right down to her little black pumps. Even the cross she wears around her neck."

"Mulder—"

"Don't say anything, Nick. Not until I've seen her."
"Mulder, you'll have to drive. It's still daylight."

The trunk lid smoothly and soundlessly glided upward. Squinting out with caution, Knight was reassured to see the sun-free interior of the parking garage that was attached to the coroner's building. Holding the lid up, Mulder said sotto voce, "Parkay?" Beneath the stillness of his features, he was tense and pale. Knight could guess something of what that controlled facade disguised.

"What'd you hit?" he asked, clambering onto the concrete floor.

"Bumped. One of those mini bollards protecting the security booth. Do you know how big the fenders on this thing are?"

"I do, yes." Knight strode to the double-glass doors which gave access to the building proper. He flagged Mulder in front of him. "Any problem with the guard?"

"He remembered me from this morning."

"It's *still* morning," Knight reminded him. His disrupted sleep—and the intensity of the dream from which he had been torn—had left him off-balance and out of sorts.

"Only for a few more minutes. That way?" Mulder indicated a corridor that must have been familiar to him.

"Yes."

Dr. Lambert was waiting for them. She glanced from Mulder to Knight; Knight answered her unspoken question with an almost imperceptible nod. She accepted that, but he could see that she held reservations. "Sorry to meet you again so soon under these circumstances, Agent Mulder."

"Thanks for calling so promptly." He motioned toward the refrigerator. "Is it the same MO?"

"No." Natalie handed him a clipboard upon which was fixed the victim's preliminary report. "She walked in front of a bus. There was no time for the driver to stop. Witnesses said she acted as though she were in a trance."

Flipping through the pages, Mulder expressed nothing of what he was thinking or feeling. "I'd like to see her."

"She's a mess," Natalie said bluntly.

"Does anything remain of her face?"

"Not much. She's badly lacerated, bones broken, skin abraded." She eyed him measuringly. "Just be

prepared."

Unlike the first victim, this one had yet to be cleaned up. She lay on the autopsy table clothed in the remains of suit jacket and trousers. Blood and grime liberally smeared the fabric. Her legs, encased in shredded nylons exhibited impact wounds both from the bus and the road.

Frowning as he took in the woman's appearance, Knight suffered a jolt of recognition. The face was badly damaged, as Natalie had warned, but its shape and the dirty copper hair surrounding it—

"Help me lift her shoulders," Mulder said. Already gloved, he was raising the woman's torso as he spoke.

Knight responded at once, supporting the limp form while Mulder probed beneath the woman's hair and collar at the nape of her neck.

"Nick—" Natalie began.

"It's okay, Doctor Lambert." With exceptional gentleness, Mulder laid the woman back down. "It isn't Scully."

"How can you be so sure, Agent Mulder?" Natalie asked.

"This woman has no scar at the base of her cervical vertebrae. Scully does." He tossed the gloves into the biohazard waste bin. "LaCroix set this up just for us, didn't he, Nick?"

"Looks that way."

Nodding to himself, Mulder desolately regarded the victim's corpse once more. "May I have Scully's things, Doctor Lambert?"

"Natalie." She drew a face. "I've already bagged her jewelry and purse." Appealing to Knight, she said, "There are bound to be questions. For example, why were the clothing and possessions of another woman found on this victim?"

Mulder wiped a hand across his stubbled jaw. Talcum residue from the inside of the glove left his face even greyer than before. "Tell them the truth: So that you'd call us. So that we'd know that Scully could be next."

"Don't be stupid. That would put Nick—"

"Sign it out to Mulder as borrowed evidence," Knight suggested. "Courtesy exchange."

Natalie's left brow flew up. "'Courtesy exchange.' Since when do—?" Knight's expression begged an early end to her objection. She sighed. "All right."

"Keep the clothes," Mulder said. "I don't think she'll want them back anyway."

"As you wish."

"Who has the case?" Knight asked.

"Washburn. The one this morning, too. Dental and fingerprint studies are in the works on both of them. He noted the physical similarities, but I don't think he's made a connection." She added, "Why should he?"

As they started out of the frigid room, Knight asked, "Have you turned up anything about the first victim?"

Taking two bulging plastic bags, one large, the other small, off the edge of her desk, Natalie replied, "Tentative ID. Didn't want to call you with it until I knew for sure."

Knight held the door open as they walked out into the corridor. "Who do you think she is?"

"Cordelia Krantz. Her co-worker, who apparently knows her fairly well—she'll be here in a little while to provide positive identification—says she's a solid citizen," Natalie shrugged, "with something of a dark side."

"Gets involved with the wrong kind of people?" Mulder asked.

"On a regular basis." Handing the two bags to Mulder, Natalie regarded both men critically. "Go home. I'll call you when I have something useful. And, Agent Mulder—"

Mulder was staring at Scully's effects, neatly labelled and bagged.

"Agent Mulder?"

He looked up at her blankly. "I'm sorry—what?"

"I apologize for calling you. I wish I could've known."

"You couldn't." He summoned a morose smile. "But I really hope that I don't hear from you again."

"I understand." Placing a hand on Knight's arm, she said, "Get some rest."

The two men stepped out of the elevator and into Knight's loft apartment. With the emphasis of repetition, Mulder said, "But what have we learned? You know and I know that those two women were killed because of us. *Why?*"

Knight stepped round him and went into the kitchen. "We don't have enough information. I agree with you that something about those two women is meant to lead us to LaCroix, and presumably, your partner. But until we know *what*, we're spinning our wheels."

Mulder shadowed him as Knight took out a bottle of blood, uncorked it, and began to drink. "There must be something—"

"LaCroix would love for you to make a mistake,

Agent Mulder." Using his sleeve, Knight wiped his mouth clean. He could sense Mulder's agitation; smell the staleness of clothing worn too long—as well as his own underlying, unique scent; count the weary respirations hissing through his lungs; and track the relative steadiness of his pulse. "It won't be as easy as the last time."

Mulder took the bottle out of his hand and raised the narrow opening to his nostrils. "You mean, fucking me won't be enough?" His face crinkled expressively at the odor.

Snatching the bottle back, Knight gave him a long, unreadable look. He started toward the stairs. "You were lucky it was enough the last time."

He was on the landing when Mulder called softly, "Mind if I watch tv?"

It was on the tip of Knight's tongue to tell him that the time would be better spent in sleep. Instead he replied gruffly, "Keep the volume down."

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It had been a long time since he had allowed another man to enter him. The warmth all down his back; the soft, curling hair at his buttocks; the insistent hardness as it pressed inward—these were pleasures he had chosen to eschew. Urged to shift to one side, he welcomed the hand that encircled his erection. Palm and fingers formed a living sheath, riding up and down the length of him, knowing where to grip tight, where not to crowd. Inside him, the other's rhythm increased, becoming demanding and rough. His mouth, wet and hot, fed along Knight's throat, the edge of sharp teeth leaving small welts, raising a rash of gooseflesh that covered his nakedness from scalp to heel. Infected by his urgency, Knight sensed the upwelling of his need, so like but unlike his partner's. A wrist was pressed against his lips. He licked it, preparing the skin to receive a different kind of penetration. His fangs lengthened beneath his lips, and he opened his mouth—

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There was *another*. Knight leapt from the bed, casting off the shroud of sleep with disorienting abruptness. Taking no time to consider what he might find, he displaced downstairs. Landing on bare feet near the living room, he found Mulder stretched out on the sofa, suit jacket off, collar and cuffs undone. Straddling

him was Janette, and between her hands she held Mulder's head turned to one side, exposing the long line of his throat.

"Leave him alone, Janette," Knight said shortly.

"Must I, Nicholas?" She brushed her lips along the curve of Mulder's jaw.

"That's not what you came for." Knight snagged Mulder's jacket off the chair and tossed it onto the back of the sofa.

"He's very pretty," Janette noted wistfully.

"He would taste awful," Knight assured her, slumping into the chair. "Had garlic for lunch."

Pouting, Janette gracefully rose. "A pity."

Released both physically and mentally, Mulder stumbled to put distance between them. The tv was on in the background with the sound off. He went to stand in front of it. His face was pale and his eyes wider than usual, but he exhibited no other ill effects. Knight had awakened just in time.

Eyes glinting, Janette also watched the mortal. "You have not done him any favors, Nicholas."

"Let me decide that," Knight began. He caught himself. Sleep clung to him like cobwebs; it was difficult to think. "What do you mean?"

"LaCroix has asked me to tell you that the clock is running. If you do not find him and this one's friend by midnight, *she* will become his third victim."

Bitterly, Mulder asked, "Don't suppose he told you where we should look?"

Smiling, Janette walked slowly toward him. "He said he has given you two important clues already."

"Janette, do you know where he is holding Mulder's partner?"

Standing his ground nervously, Mulder did not move when the woman touched a finger to his mouth. His bottom lip, especially, seemed to captivate her. "No, Nicholas, I do not. Nor do I want to."

"She's an FBI agent. Did you know that? Do you realize how dangerous this game of his could become? For you and me? For all of us here?"

"You know LaCroix, Nicholas. He will do as he pleases."

As her fingertip floated downward from Mulder's chin to the bottom of his sternum, he said huskily, "Can you tell us what the clues mean?"

Prettily, she demurred, "I do not even know what the clues are." Spreading her hand wide upon Mulder's chest, she commenced an hypnotic caress. Mulder flicked a beseeching look in Knight's direction.

"Janette—"

"Oh, all right!" she said with exasperation. She stalked across the room to her shawl, heavy and black, which lay where she had flung it across the kitchen table. She took it up and began to arrange it over her head and shoulders. "He did ask me to give you a final clue."

"What is it?" Mulder alerted, hope bringing animation to his face.

With bored hauteur, she recited, "'Beneath the words, she lies.'"

Knight frowned. Feeling Mulder's attention shift toward him, he schooled his features to neutrality.

"Tell him," Mulder said slowly, "that if he hurts her, I'll see that he regrets it."

Making a soft clicking sound, she tidied her gloves. "You play right into his hands." Completely shrouded in the densely woven shawl which reached down to the soles of her boots, she walked toward the door, her heels clicking. Knight anticipated her.

"Through here?" he asked, amused.

"I have a car waiting." She stood on tiptoe and placed a kiss on Knight's cheek. "Take care, Nicholas," she said seriously. "LaCroix is very angry."

"Never would've guessed." He glanced at his watch. "It's early yet. Be careful."

"Of course."

He slid the elevator door closed; the cab began to move downward. Running a hand across the scorch mark left by the heat of a long-ago fire, Knight remarked, "This is where I tried to kill him before." He glanced up to be sure that Mulder was listening. Absently rubbing his chest, he stood near the tv, images off the screen limning his features with random flickerings of light and dark. "There was nothing left of him, Agent Mulder. Nothing."

"Maybe he pulled the old booga-booga on you too."

"I don't think so."

"That last clue—does that mean he's buried Scully alive?"

"I don't know."

"Which words? An inscription on a headstone?"

"Maybe. And maybe he's left her under a billboard somewhere. Did you get any rest?"

Mulder's shoulders slumped. "Some. How did your friend get here? It's still daylight, isn't it?"

"Her shawl was wet; if it's raining, there must be heavy cloud cover. And she has an accommodating chauffeur." Scratching the new growth on his chin, Knight said, "She was giving us as much time as possible."

"It's almost four." Mulder's lips flattened into a frustrated line. "Shouldn't your ME have something by now?"

"When she does, she will call us. Natalie is well aware of the urgency of the situation." Knight's eyes went to the unoccupied sofa. At the moment his bed seemed a very long way away. A few footsteps later, he sank into soft cushions, assuring himself he would remain there for only a couple of minutes. Mulder, all barely contained nervous energy, fished a pen and a small notepad from his pocket and began to scribble furiously.

The phone rang some time later. Knight's lashes rose just enough for him to observe the other man hovering over the answering machine. The volume was turned down; Mulder cocked his head to one side as he listened. His expression told Knight that the caller's information was useful but not imperative; had he wanted to, Knight could have listened himself. Instead, he closed his eyes and drifted off again.

For the next forty-five minutes, he slipped in and out of a much-needed slumber, always at the back of his mind intensely aware that an unpleasant confrontation awaited him before the end of this day. Mulder made notes, paced, spoke hushedly on the phone, scribbled, and circled the room again. More than once Knight surfaced to find himself the object of Mulder's broodingly speculative hazel stare. And more than once he pretended merely to stir and immediately fall back asleep.

It was nearly five when Knight pulled himself up and yawned. "What do you have?"

"Not much. The second victim has been identified by her husband. Susan Swallin. She never made it to work this morning. The only odd thing to turn up was a small rubbery cap, the kind used on personal stereo earphones. Dr. Lambert suspects that that was just road debris collected with the rest of the evidence." He tapped his pen against the pad of paper. "I've written down everything I can think of. Maybe something will register when you look at it. If those two women were meant to be clues, then something's got to be missing!"

"You don't know how LaCroix's mind works, Mulder."

"And you do?"

"Not well enough. For which I'm grateful." Knight forced himself to his feet. "Give me fifteen minutes. Have you eaten anything?"

Mulder melted into the cushions. "You told your vampire lady-friend that I'd had garlic."

"She knew I was lying," Knight said. "Vampires can smell garlic miles away."

"How much of that stuff is true?" Mulder asked, shaking his head. "You know: the garlic, crucifixes, holy water?"

"Most of it's overrated. Some of it can slow us down; none of it can kill us outright." Knight walked purposefully toward the staircase. "If you want to destroy a vampire, Agent Mulder, you must use fire, a stake through the heart, or a very sharp blade to remove the head."

"Is that true for LaCroix, too?"

The scorched door stood as mocking testimony to LaCroix's immortality. "No."

"No," Mulder repeated defeatedly. Then from somewhere he dredged up a brittle smile. "I'll bet Elvis is one of you guys, too. Am I right?"

Admiring Mulder very much at that moment, Knight said, gently, "Sorry, Agent Mulder. I'm sworn to secrecy."

The late autumn sun was gone. For four hours Mulder, Knight, and Doctor Lambert had been poring over the police reports regarding the deaths of the two women. Every detail was remarked upon, discussed, reviewed, and discussed again. Officially, the first woman had been killed by an unsavory acquaintance; the second, obviously, had walked in front of a bus. Only Mulder, Knight, and Lambert knew how and why they had really died—at least in part. And it was not the *how* they needed to answer so much as the *why*. On the surface, the women had been killed because they resembled, or were made to resemble, Agent Dana Scully. That much was obvious. The first woman's corpse had told them two things: She looked like Scully and she had been killed by a vampire. The second woman might have walked under the bus for any number of reasons—but she had done so only because LaCroix had directed her to. Had it not been for the effects discovered on her body, all of which had belonged to Agent Scully, no connection would have been made. But her death told them that LaCroix wanted to be absolutely certain that they understood. Scully was not yet dead, but she could have been. So far, his choice of victims explained nothing.

As Knight read through the accident report for the fourth time, Mulder studied the information regarding Cordelia Krantz. Scully's gold cross dangled on its

delicate chain, suspended from his fingers. The light glanced off it, catching Knight's attention again and again. He found himself staring at it mesmerized, torn between wanting to touch it and fling it as far away as possible.

Natalie asked one of the night orderlies to pick up some dinner for them just after ten. When it arrived, she insisted that Mulder eat something, if only a few bites. He did so, perfunctorily. "We can't give up," she said firmly. "There must be *something* we're missing."

"Yeah," Mulder said morosely. "But what have we learned about these two women that has told us categorically where to find LaCroix?"

"They died in two different places," Knight pointed out, "which would seem to indicate that the hotel where Krantz was murdered is of no more importance than the street on which Swallin died."

"The Belgium Hotel on Montague, and Cushing Street," Natalie mumbled around her cheeseburger.

"The names mean nothing?" Mulder asked. He looked from Natalie, who shook her head, to Knight, who agreed, "Nor to me."

"What about the room where Krantz was found? Did it have a name?"

"Numbered rooms only." Knight wished he could escape the smell of their meal. "Combining their names doesn't seem to result in anything significant."

"Krantz-Swallin; Swallin-Krantz." Mulder shoved a french fry into his mouth. "We could make anagrams forever. But in which combinations? Cordelia Krantz, Susan Swallin, or Cordelia Krantz Susan Swallin, all run together? Do we have to include their middle names, their maiden names, their mothers' maiden—"

"Whatever it is, it will be obvious," Knight said bleakly. "LaCroix knows we'll overlook the obvious. It's a human failing."

"But you're no longer human," Mulder pointed out. "He's expecting you to work it out."

"Don't be too sure about that." Knight took to his feet. The odor was nauseating.

Face in hands, Mulder mumbled, "Cordelia was the daughter of Lear. Susan—there are a million Susans."

"Mulder," Natalie murmured. "His last clue. Have you been able to come up with anything for that?"

"Beneath the words, she lies." The phrase seemed to fascinate as much as unsettle him. He studied the notepad briefly, then rubbed his eyes. "What kind of words? A sign? A library?" The muscles in his jaws clenched tight. "A cemetery marker?"

"Words are also spoken," Natalie said thoughtfully.

"Yeeaah—" He sat a little straighter. "And to lie beneath them, you'd have to be where? In the basement of a theatre? A recording studio? A radio sta—?"

Knight's head swung round. At the same instant, the door opened and a young police officer carrying a small plastic evidence bag stepped tentatively inside. "Doctor Lambert? I was told I'd find you here."

"Yes?" Natalie wiped her mouth on a paper napkin and crossed the room to greet him. "What is that?"

"A woman dropped it off at our station. She said her son picked it up at the accident site downtown this morning. You know, where that young woman was hit by the bus?"

Lifting the packet to the light, Natalie said, "It's a personal stereo. Ah—" She nodded to herself. "The son took it, is that right?"

"She said she chewed him out," the officer explained. "And she did make him come with her to apologize."

"When was that turned in?" Mulder asked, tucking Scully's necklace into his jacket pocket as he advanced on quiet feet.

"This afternoon, about four." The young man watched him skittishly. "My—I was asked to drop it off on my way home."

"May I?" Mulder asked with exaggerated civility. At Natalie's nod, he took the packet out of her hands. He went to the counter bearing the carton of protective gloves.

The officer's nametag was prominently displayed. "Thanks, Ron," Knight said, ingratiatingly. He moved nearer to establish direct eye contact. "This may be the breakthrough we've been hoping for. But, I'm curious—why did you bring it to Doctor Lambert rather than take it to the detectives on the case?"

The man's mouth opened and closed. Something seemed to worry him. "I—was told to."

"By who?" Knight asked reasonably.

"By—by—" His face suddenly cleared. "Inspector LaCroix. He said—"

"What," Knight whispered, standing very close to the confused messenger, "did he say?"

"To bring it by after work."

Knight glanced back at the others; Natalie and Mulder were motionlessly attentive. "Ron," Knight said gently. "What time is it?"

The man blinked. "Time—?" He raised his wrist. It was bare, but a faint tan line the width of a watchband encircled it. "I— Must be about six. My shift ends at five thirty."

"A little later than—" Natalie waved Mulder to silence. She went to the young officer and took him by the arm. Giving him a kindly smile, she said, "We're very grateful. It's been a hectic night for all of us."

The officer shifted uncertainly. "Look, I—"

"It's all right." Natalie considerably guided him to the door. "If we have any questions, someone in my office or the detective on the case will call." She pushed the door open, the courtesy of the gesture serving to mitigate the implicit dismissal. With a last, frightened search of their faces, he dove past her. The hurried sound of his footsteps echoed back at them until Natalie firmly pulled the door shut. She strode back into the room. "Inspector LaCroix." There's a terrifying thought."

Mulder was delicately probing the plastic case of the small device. The empty evidence packet lay on the table beside his elbow. "It's a radio, not a cassette player." Using a thumb to turn up the volume, he held the uncapped earphone near his ear. "Talk show."

Inwardly preparing himself, Knight said, "Let me hear it." After listening for only a few seconds, he handed the earpiece back to Mulder. "Check the tuner. Could it have been jarred in the accident?"

Mulder tried to work the serrated wheel; it would not budge. "I could probably force it. But it feels like it's glued in place."

"His radio station?" Natalie said sharply.

"Whose?" Mulder said. "Not—?"

Unhappily, Knight nodded, "Yes. The first woman—her name was Cordelia Krantz, right? Does she have a middle name?"

Natalie shuffled through the pile of papers until she came to the one she wanted. "Edith."

"Cordelia Edith Krantz. Was Krantz her maiden name?"

"The report said she wasn't married." Natalie scanned the sheets, a line forming between her eyes. "No, wait— She was divorced. It must be—Here it is. Runyon." Her voice hardened, and she repeated, "Maiden name, Runyon."

"Cordelia Edith Runyon Krantz. CERK. Those are his call letters."

"A radio station," Mulder said disbelievingly. "That misanthropic maniac has a radio station!?"

"Beneath the words, she lies," Knight quoted. "It's the first place I should have thought of, but—"

"It was too obvious."

"Yes," Knight murmured, accepting without protest the reproach in Mulder's voice. It was justified. There

was no point in attempting to explain that LaCroix was predictable only in his hatred of mortals. The clock on the wall, with quartz precision, read ten after eleven. "We've got to hurry."

"What do you want me to do?" Natalie asked.

"Keep your cell phone with you. We may need your help."

She caught his hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Anything, Nick."

"It might be."

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In the car, Mulder sat with hands clenched, head bent forward, a lightning rod under blackening skies.

"Can we get there in time?"

"It'll be close."

"Then drive faster."

"He wants us there, Mulder."

"And if we don't make it?"

"We will."

Ten minutes later, as the Cadillac raced down the road, a siren went off behind them.

"Ignore it," Mulder commanded.

"Can't. I don't have time to shake 'em—and we don't want to lead anyone where we're going." Knight glided the car to the curb. In his wing mirror, he watched the traffic patrolman approach his window. Ready with badge in hand, he announced curtly, "Following a lead."

"Detective Knight." The officer gestured vaguely at Knight's car. "Your car's unmarked. Don't you have a light?"

His smile a gash in the darkness, Knight nodded toward the dash. "Broken. Anything else?" It was not a lie. Schanke, in his pre-vacation fidgetiness had somehow shorted the wiring.

"No, sir. Be careful."

"I will. Good night." With that, Knight floored the accelerator and the powerful car lunged back onto the road.

"It's fifteen till," Mulder said.

"I know," Knight growled. He was counting on LaCroix to wait for them. After all, LaCroix wanted Mulder, not Scully. And he would much prefer to take retribution in person.

Restlessly tapping his fingertips against the dash, Mulder reached out and turned on the radio. His hand froze then slowly came away as LaCroix's voice, cultured and softly confiding, whispered through the

speakers. "Listen to him often?" he asked.

For a moment Knight did not respond. "It's an old program. A rerun."

"That must mean, 'all the time.'" Mulder switched the radio off with more force than was strictly necessary. "But it also means—"

"He's not on the air. Hang on." Knight gunned the engine, covering the last mile at high speed, hoping all the while that nothing would dart out of the darkness into the road. Whipping the wheel round, he swerved onto an asphalt drive, accelerated again, then brought the car to a rocking, tire-smoking stop outside a low building fronted with shrubs and small trees. Just above the foliage, the letters CERK, formed in painted metal, were unmissable.

Knight caught Mulder's arm before he could jump out of the car. "Stay with me," he hissed. "Stay *behind* me!"

"Let's go!" Mulder demanded.

Together they loped toward the building. Knight realized there was nothing to be gained in attempting silence; LaCroix would have heard their approach long before their wheels hit the drive. The structure was familiar; he had been here before, some while back. The layout was fairly simple; it was, after all, a simple operation: A tiny reception area, a couple of rooms filled with equipment, the broadcasting suite, a single restroom, a closet, a storage room—all on one floor. He did not recall a basement, though his memory was not to be trusted regarding that one visit. His inspection had been cursory, that of a trained detective marking undefended exits.

"Where would they be?" Mulder asked.

"Let's go round to the back." The impulse to look at his watch was almost irresistible. Knight knew they had scant minutes to spare—but he was certain it was not midnight yet. He led the way, diving into the impenetrable shadow cast by a tall hedge. His vision, far superior to that of any human, allowed him to race ahead. Regardless, Mulder stayed with him, so close his warmth broadcasted his status of prey.

All at once Knight was struck by a sense of dread and overwhelming urgency. He paused, head up, every sense stretched to its limit. Mulder, blind, plowed into him.

"Wha—?"

"Shh!" And then he understood what he was hearing, albeit almost subliminally, and his heart leapt into his throat. "*LaCroix!*" he shouted. He acted without thought, breaking into a run, his coat

streaming out behind him like a huge black pennant as he charged toward the small structure that was only now visible. It was attached to the back of the building, a slanted, enclosed entry which gave access to a cellar or basement.

"What is it?" Mulder cried.

Knight screamed, "*LaCroix, don't!*" His breath was wasted—it was not yet midnight, but they were too late. He knew that with certainty.

"Nick, please!"

"Stand back." Knight did not wait to see if Mulder obeyed before wrenching one of the wide, heavy doors off its hinges. He plunged down a short flight of aged stairs, sweeping his gaze over the musty interior. The floor was hard-packed soil, the walls earth reinforced with an inconsistent mix of steel and wooden beams. Ancient boxes, overflowing with cloth-bound cables, linking equipment, and an array of vacuum tubes, cluttered the surprisingly large room. At its farthest end stood a heavy door; from beneath it glowed a thin strip of faint and flickering light.

Striding forward, Knight reached for the handle. Unlocked, the door came open with no resistance.

"Scully!" Mulder tried to crowd forward, but Knight held him back.

The other vampire was crouched at the opposite end of the room, the woman, Mulder's partner, unmoving in the coil of his arms. Blood seeped from her wounded throat; her blue eyes stared at nothing. "You took so long to get here, Nicholas," LaCroix chided. "I decided not to wait."

A few feet away, the remains of a variety of crosses, cobbled together from scraggly strips of cardboard, long rusty nails, half-rotted wood, and tatters of cloth, formed what may have been a protective circle. The hard ground at its center displayed a shallow gouge; the mark of a frantically kicking heel, Knight thought. If she had put up a struggle, then LaCroix had lost control of the situation—either intentionally, in order to toy with her; or, because she had succeeded in outwitting him.

Scully's eyes moved; slowly, as if with difficulty, they tracked toward Knight and Mulder. *She was still alive.* Knight said levelly, "Let her go, LaCroix."

"Certainly." Gently, almost reverently, the vampire laid her down; then he stood, wiping the blood from his mouth and licking the heel of his palm and the back of his hand until all traces were removed. "After all, you can't save her—unless you bring her over. And that you never will do." A dark, powerful figure, he towered

over Scully. With an inviting sweep of the hand, he added, "So either you finish her—or I will."

"Think about what you're doing!" Knight said, a hint of desperation in his voice that was not entirely feigned. "They are *FBI agents*. Are you trying to destroy us?"

"So we move on. A change will do us good."

"Change merely for the sake of change? That is the philosophy of a cancer cell."

LaCroix shrugged. "Cancer does not concern me." He glanced down at Scully, his gaze strangely benign. "Will you do it, or shall I?"

Thinking furiously, Knight argued, "Why should I?"

"Nick—I!"

Knight held Mulder in place by force. "Give me a reason."

"I'll give you two," LaCroix offered magnanimously. "She might prefer dying in your arms; *I* seem to repel her. And perhaps—" He shot the human a look filled with loathing.

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I'll allow *him* to live a little longer." He revealed sharp, white teeth. "Another year or two, I think. And all the while he would be aware that he had caused her death."

"You murdering—I!"

Knight rounded on the man behind him. The ferocity and unexpectedness of his attack left Mulder completely defenseless. He went down with a startled shout, landing hard enough to drive the wind out of him. Knight delivered a stunning blow to the head to keep him down, then quickly rifled through his pockets and under his jacket until he was in possession of Mulder's pistol. Tucking it into his waistband, Knight straightened.

"Mul-der," Scully moaned. "Oh—Mulder."

Grimly determined, Knight stepped toward her. "You shouldn't have done this, LaCroix. *He* didn't kill your LA children."

"No?"

"I have proof."

Diverted briefly by Mulder's whooping attempts to catch his breath, LaCroix murmured, "What sort of proof?"

"Police report." Before LaCroix could voice his scorn, Knight continued, "Remember, none of the authorities investigating their deaths believed as Agent Mulder did that vampires were involved. They stated only facts."

"I know the story, Nicholas," LaCroix said. "It was,

nevertheless, *his* fault they died."

"In fact," Knight said, bluntly, "it was your *child's* inability to bring a mere woman over that allowed her to kill them all—including herself."

"You're telling me," LaCroix placidly interpreted, "that *I* failed?"

Knight dropped to his knees beside Scully. Deathly pale, she lacked the strength to object as he took her hand in his and raised it to his mouth. His lips glided across her palm to her wrist. The tell-tale rhythm of her heart was weak and thready. "I'm telling you that your child's *stupidity* caused them to die." Behind him, he could hear Mulder struggling to reach his feet. "Do you really want to give this human credit for destroying your children? Do you really believe he deserves it?"

LaCroix regarded the human in question without sympathy. "Perhaps not," he said disinterestedly. "But, then, does he deserve your protection?"

A tiny cry of protest escaped the woman. Befanged and yellow-eyed, Knight gathered her, light as a child, into his arms. He laid her across his lap, a hand on her bare thigh warning her to remain still. Her strength was no match for his under any circumstances; but if she tried to fight him now, she would certainly hasten her dying. Clad only in a short, lightweight tunic, she felt like ice even to his chill touch, and her every breath was labored. "It is enough that he has it." Knight raised his head. "I want your word, LaCroix—I finish this and you will leave Mulder alone. Not just for a year or two, but for ever."

"Nick—" Mulder croaked.

LaCroix tapped a finger against his lips, "Now, that sounds unsettlingly familiar," he drawled. "You wouldn't have duplicity in mind, would you, Nicholas?"

Caustically, Knight said, "You have left me so many alternatives."

"That is true." He scowled thoughtfully. "It is not like you to agree to kill. Is he so important to you?"

With sudden, savage anger, Knight shouted, "You should have left her alone!"

"Ah, but I didn't." LaCroix's eyes narrowed; he looked like a basilisk contemplating a butterfly for breakfast. "'Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice—' Why can't I trust you?"

"Distrust," Knight said bleakly, "is what passes for honor among us."

"Oh, Nicholas." Unwilling affection, laced with contempt, informed each syllable. "All right. You may have my word. But only if you get on with it *now*!"

Swallowing hard, Knight whispered, "I'm sorry, Agent Scully." With soothing fingers he combed the hair away from her throat, exposing the two holes weeping blood. Dirty, clammy, and less than fragrant, she still excited the predator within him. "Messy, LaCroix," he complained, and wiped a hand over the gore. Moistening his lips, he bent nearer.

"Nicholas," the other vampire tsked. "You were not always so fastidious."

A few feet away Mulder's voice cracked. "What are you *doing*!?"

His words were obliterated by Scully's sudden shriek, painfully high and uncontrolled. She wriggled frantically, then bucked as though besieged by whole-body spasms, restrained only by Knight's implacable embrace.

"Nick, don't—!"

"*Stop it!*" Scully gasped. "Stop it, stop it, *please!*" The hand at her throat began to smoke, and Knight himself was abruptly racked with violent shudders.

Inundated with comprehension, LaCroix thundered, "*You are mad!*"

"You give me no choice!" Face contorted with agony, Knight continued to overpower the woman until she went utterly limp, assuring him that the last vestiges of the vampire infection had been burned out of her. At that instant, he laid her down, the need to be conscientious producing a bloody sheen on his forehead. At last he allowed himself to fall back against the earthen wall, extending his trembling, injured hand out away from his body.

Half-crawling, half-staggering, Mulder stumbled to Scully's side. The terrible whimpering cries had faded, replaced by a pitiable, almost soundless weeping. "What did you do to her?" he demanded hoarsely, dragging his partner close and sheltering her against his chest. She clung to him, her face half hidden beneath his lapel.

LaCroix spat out, "He has made her a hunter!"

"I did as you wished." Exhaling sharply, Knight turned his hand so that the palm was visible. "I finished it." A tiny gold cross was embedded in charred and melted flesh.

At sight of it, Mulder searched his pocket. "You took Scully's cross."

"Pull it out, Mulder," Knight grated. "Please."

Gingerly, Mulder obeyed, flinching as strips of Knight's skin sloughed off at his touch. He placed the cross in one of Scully's hands. Her fingers curled convulsively around it, her knuckles gleaming skeletally.

white.

Shaking his head, LaCroix said damningly, "You are beyond belief, Nicholas."

"You would have killed her to avenge a wrong *he* didn't commit."

"And what you have done is insupportable. She is a *hunter*! I should inform the Enforcers."

"Which would lead them back to me—and you," Knight pointed out. "Is that what you want?"

LaCroix's eyes narrowed. "I could kill them now."

"Including me?"

LaCroix snarled, "*Especially* you!" Then a raw laugh exploded from him. "You become more diabolical—in the worst possible sense!—with each passing decade. If you weren't so obsessed with these mortals, we could have such *fun*!"

"LaCroix—"

The other vampire raised an imperious hand. "Enough!" He swung toward Mulder. "Next time I will be more thorough."

Mulder opened his mouth; before he could speak, Knight retorted, "Next time she'll know you're coming."

"Do you think that will save them?" LaCroix asked silkily.

"No. You will. You promised."

"I promised!" LaCroix hissed. "*Nicholas*." Knight's name was pronounced with an inferno's worth of condemnation. For a moment LaCroix stood silent, a dangerously intimidating presence. And then he smiled. "There are worse things than death." With that he swung round and vanished from the room. Knight, his senses attuned to the passage of vampires, felt LaCroix's departure into the night.

"Nick."

His hand was taken into another's grip; a careful fingertip traced the ridge of scarred but already healing tissue. "Nick," Mulder implored, "we've got to get Scully to a doctor."

"Of course," he muttered. "Sorry." Knight found himself the object of Mulder's searching gaze. His hand was raised to the man's mouth. For an instant, the vampire was the one held spellbound.

Scully, who had remained silent while Knight recovered, stirred against Mulder's chest. Knight was released. "It's okay, Scully," Mulder assured her, tenderly stroking her hair. "Nick's going to help us." She blinked up at him, then twisted toward Knight, as though suddenly reminded that he was with them.

Nodding, Knight unsteadily climbed to his feet.

"Believe him, Agent Scully." He extricated the cell phone from his coat pocket. "I'll have to go outside," he said thickly. "Back in a couple of minutes." It was not without difficulty that he withstood the urge to look back.

XXX

Balanced on a barstool in Natalie's apartment, Knight tested the bandage on his hand then smiled gratefully up into the face of his closest human friend. "Thanks, Nat. Feels a lot better."

"You must have held the cross a long time," she commented, "for it to have burned so deeply."

"Or I've been backpedaling."

Packing the remnants of gauze into her kitbag, she shook her head. "If so, you earned a bumper crop of points tonight."

"Like savings-stamps?"

She ruffled his hair. "Something like that. I'll be right back. I'm going to put this away."

As she disappeared into the study, Knight cautiously took to his feet. He walked to the door of Natalie's bedroom and peered inside. Backed by pillows and swathed in blankets, a watchful Scully waited, clearly having sensed his approach; Mulder, sitting on the edge of the bed, glanced round curiously.

"He's not the enemy, Scully," Mulder said.

"I am not." Knight took a step into the room. "But you have a heightened awareness of me now, don't you, Agent Scully?"

When Scully only stared darkly back at him and said nothing, Mulder asked, "Does he look different? Can you smell him? What?"

Her mouth pursed tightly. "It's like—" A hand fluttered from breast to temple. "I don't know—an electrical shock? I can't really explain it."

"What about LaCroix? After he bit you? Did it feel the sa—?"

Scully visibly withdrew. "Mulder—"

"It's a painful experience, Agent Mulder," Knight said mildly. "In more ways than one. Even after eight hundred years, I have not forgotten."

"But he didn't— She won't become—?"

"Tell your partner what you felt when I placed the cross on your neck," Knight suggested.

Some of the tension seemed to flow out of her. "It felt like acid. I thought you were killing me." She fell quiet. "And when he went away—LaCroix, I mean—it seemed as though a weight was lifted from my chest. I

could breathe again."

"He is a very powerful vampire." Knight said wryly. "I don't do that to you, do I?"

Sighing, Scully gave her head a shake. "No, you don't."

"Agent Scully—I know this is difficult for you, and I am sorry," Knight said sincerely. "I made the decision that you would live. I believed it was the right one."

"It was," Mulder said.

A slow smile touched the corners of Scully's mouth. She nodded. "He's right. It's just this is all so weird, impossible—" Her bruised shoulders rolled in a slow shrug. "But, yes, you made the right choice. I do thank you, Detective Knight."

Natalie came up close behind him. "Nick. It must be almost dawn."

"I know." He slung an arm round her, revelling in the warmth of her cheek against his. "Thanks, Nat. You've—"

"Don't say it," she said with feigned brusqueness. "What's an illegal transfusion now and again?"

He kissed the top of her head. "A great deal."

Patting his back, she self-consciously slipped from his embrace. To Scully she announced, "I just got the results of your latest CBC. You're making a remarkable recovery, you know."

"That's reassuring," Scully murmured dryly. Then she wondered out loud, "Because of what you did, Detective Knight?"

"Nick. Partly. And partly because you were healthy to begin with." Knight licked his lips and glanced nervously toward the door. "I must go."

"You'd better drive him, Mulder." Scully's words drew a startled look from her partner. She explained, "Unless he's only going across the street, he won't get there in time."

Knight smiled to himself. Mulder went to the window and peeked through the blinds. A thin shaft of rosy light fell across his shoes. "You're right."

"But before you go, would you bring my bag?" she asked. "You do have it?"

"It's in the Caddy." Hands in his pockets, Mulder gave her a critical once-over. "Natalie said you're supposed to rest."

"I will. Just want to make a few notes."

"For your report, Agent Scully?" Knight asked.

"If I filed an official report, nobody would believe me," she replied pragmatically. "I'll leave it to Mulder to concoct some explanation for our AD. I just want to—organize my thoughts."

Walking up to Knight, hand outstretched, Mulder waited until the keys to the Cadillac were plopped into his open palm. "Don't think my imagination's that good, Scully."

Natalie gave Knight's shoulder a nudge. "I have some calls to make. Say good-bye before you leave."

"Of course."

Knight stood unobtrusively silent until he heard the dial tone two rooms away. Only then did he approach the bed. "You wanted to talk to me alone?"

"It's worse when you're closer," she observed a little shakily.

"Sorry." At once he started to move away, but stopped when Scully brought up a hand. She said apologetically, "I should have said 'more intense.' I didn't mean to be rude."

"You weren't."

Scully said, "I see you as Mulder can't. I *know* what you are in a way that he never will." She hesitated; then, with sudden resolve, went on, "And I sense other things."

Knight's stony expression was not encouraging.

"He's a big boy and can look after himself," she conceded, "—usually. And I don't think you would willingly harm him. Just—just make sure that you don't?"

Had he been blessed with the blood volume of a mortal, Knight suspected he might blush. "Does he know how you feel about him?"

She smiled for the first time without reserve. "He's my partner. And my friend. We look out for each other."

With simple candor, Knight said, "He will never come to harm from me."

"I have to believe that," she said. "You've saved my live twice now." At his acute look, she acknowledged, "I remember. And even though what I *feel* tells me that you are dangerous, what I *know* tells me that you are not."

Footsteps sounded at the apartment door. Knight said somberly, "Stay on your guard, Agent Scully. I hope I've changed LaCroix's mind about Mulder. But he does not relinquish a grudge readily." He lightly touched the bandage at her throat. "And of course now you are a hunter."

"Because I can sense you—vampires? That makes me a hunter?"

"Yes."

She said firmly, "I have more important things to do!"

"I know that. But LaCroix may never believe it."

Mulder walked into the door carrying Scully's case. He set it on the edge of the bed and began to undo the straps. "He'll try again, then?"

"I hope not. But he's unpredictable—and his word means nothing."

"Great." Mulder lifted the laptop out of the case. He handed it to Scully, then helped to arrange it on the bedcovers. "But she'll always know if he's around, right?"

"As easily as she can sense *me*, she will have *no* difficulty with LaCroix, that's true."

Carrying a mug brimming with warm milk, Natalie carefully entered the room. "Drink this, Dana. And then you can tell me what you want to eat."

"I'm not very hungry." Scully grimaced expressively.

"We'll come up with something." She kept a steadying hand on the mug as Scully took a tiny sip.

"Will you be able to stay here until I get back?" Mulder asked.

"Yes. All day. She'll be fine."

"Don't worry, Mulder." Knight started for the door. "LaCroix, more than most of us, is a creature of the night. Nat, if you need anything—"

"I'll call." She smiled her reassurance. "Time you went home, Nick."

"Past time." He glanced over his shoulder at Scully and caught her staring at him, disquieted. "It'll be all right," he said obliquely. "I promise."

They went out through the west door where the sun had yet to purge the darkness. Mulder had moved the car to the curb just outside. He strode up to the trunk and keyed it open. Making certain no one was around, he gestured for Knight to leave the building. He closed him inside the trunk then took the wheel of the Cadillac to drive them to Knight's home, stopping once, just long enough to pick up breakfast, at an all-night cafe.

Once inside the sanctuary of the garage, Mulder opened the trunk lid and held it up while Knight vaulted out. "You're certain she'll be safe with Natalie?"

"LaCroix will take his anger out on me before he bothers with either of you."

"Positive?"

Knight gave a weary sigh. "There is nothing certain in this world—as you well know." He wrinkled his

nose. "What is that?"

Raising a plastic cup and a small paper bag, Mulder answered, "Breakfast. For me."

"Certainly not for me." Heavy feet bore Knight to the door to the lift. Mulder walked inside with him. Activating the motor, Knight leaned back against the cab wall. "Thought you were going back to Natalie's."

"Not right away." Lifting the cup to his lips, Mulder sampled his coffee through a narrow slit in the plastic lid. "Tell me about hunters."

The elevator lurched to a stop. Knight pulled the door open and stepped into the loft. "There aren't very many of them these days—especially in this part of the world."

"Because vampires kill them?"

"Sometimes. Mostly because of lack of faith."

"Faith." Mulder sidled toward the chair in the living room. "All right if I eat here?"

Lumbering to a stop in front of the refrigerator, Knight took hold of the handle and gave it a jerk. "Don't recall your asking before." He selected two bottles and carried them to the sofa. Slouching amidst the cushions, legs stretched out on the coffee table before him, he pried the cork from one and raised the smooth rim to his mouth. When the first gulps were settled inside him, he said, "You don't believe in God, do you?" A sock-encased toe nudged the remotes to within Mulder's reach. Mulder took the hint. Within seconds darkness replaced the embryonic light of dawn. A moment later, flames leapt up in the fireplace. Soon a gentle heat pervaded the room.

Unwrapping his sandwich, Mulder muttered, "Not really, no. Certainly not in an omnipotent entity that gives a rat's patootie about what happens to any of us."

"Agent Scully does."

"That's true," Mulder said with a hint of chagrin. Several emotions raced across his features in quick succession. "So are you telling me there *is* a God?"

"Would you believe me if I did?"

Mulder's dismay was nearly palpable. "I don't know."

"I was talking about faith," Knight reminded him. "Once it has been nurtured long enough, it becomes instinctive. She knew what I intended, even if she was unaware of the specifics."

Mulder stared at him. "Yeah?"

"She saw the cross before I placed it against her wounds."

"Oh." Mulder's sandwich cooled as he thought this over. He inhaled sharply. "I still don't understand why

she changed."

"You heard what LaCroix said?"

"Hm—" Mulder delicately probed at the darkening bruise on his jaw. "Sometimes the signal was a little weak."

"Sorry. You know I had to do that?"

"I'll live. But which bit did you mean?"

"That I could kill her or bring her over? Those were my only options?"

A trace of anger compressed Mulder's lips. "Yeah. He did it so you couldn't 'trick' him this time."

Taking a pull from the bottle, Knight welcomed the thick, rich blood sluicing down his throat. He was ravenous. "So he said. But I doubt that he intended to take things that far. Remember, Mulder: He wanted *you*. Unless some day your Scully decides to tell us what went on while she was captive, we may never know the truth."

About to take a bite, Mulder faltered. "Went on?"

"You saw all the makeshift crosses arranged in a protective circle. Believe it or not that would have slowed LaCroix down; very likely, it enraged him."

"Goaded him into attacking, is that what you're saying?"

"We arrived in time. It wasn't midnight yet. I think she might have come close to getting away. He has a hair-trigger temper."

"That bastard."

Knight finished the first bottle and opened the second. He would need a third. "Because of what happens when a vampire bites, she was at a cross-roads."

"Yeah?"

"Left untended, she would have died—LaCroix had taken too much. Had she been fed the blood of a vampire, she would have become one herself."

"Seriously?" Mulder seemed not to have considered the possibility.

"Seriously. On the other hand, a half-drained mortal sometimes can be saved if the mark of the vampire is treated at the earliest possible moment with something sanctified."

"Something like Scully's cross?"

"Yes."

"But how did it *change* her?" Mulder doggedly bit into his sandwich. "Why does she know when you're around, even when she can't see or hear you?" His Adam's apple bobbed, once, twice—Knight made himself look away.

Incautiously, he replied, "Because she was tainted

by LaCroix's bite."

"*Tainted!*"

"Think of it in terms of—say—a mosquito bite. It—"

"*Mosquito bite!*"

"Calm down, Mulder. The bite itself introduces something foreign into the body. Mainly, it encourages the blood to flow freely. But that same agent becomes a catalyst if the victim is fed vampire blood. Placing Agent Scully's cross against the wound eradicated the vampire itself—but that agent remains, though in a modified form."

"What form?" Mulder sounded sick.

"Because it came from a vampire, it has given her some of those characteristics. She will be sensitive to light—" Mulder groaned loudly. "Not like I am. But it will affect her." He added sardonically, "Sunblock will help."

"What else?"

"She'll know instantly if there's a vampire around. Any vampire."

"And?"

"That's it."

"That's it? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

Relief removed some of the tension from Mulder's face. "That's workable." Sudden doubt made him frown; he swallowed hard. "Why was LaCroix so ticked off, then?"

Knight smiled indulgently. "*We* can't sense *her*. She can move about with comparative freedom in daylight. Do you understand now?"

"So that if she wanted to go after you, she'd have an advantage."

"A significant advantage. And most people would believe that vampires—if they believed in such creatures—should be hunted down and destroyed."

"Okay. But there's nothing about what you did to her that would *make* her want to hunt you down, is there?"

"Not intrinsically, no." Knight spent a few moments savoring the contents of the second bottle. His body was slowly recovering; the hunger clamored less urgently—and Agent Mulder's throat no longer commanded his attention. "It will depend upon her sense of moral duty. She may feel obligated to act—to retaliate."

"Not Scully. Maybe, if you were a threat, but—"

"Most of us are not. Most of us have learned to cohabit with mortals. Modern technology and increas-

ing populations are forcing us to adapt."

"Except the ones like LaCroix."

"He was a Roman General," he said reflectively. "I don't think he can change."

"Despite what you say, you like him, don't you?" There was no eluding the disappointment in Mulder's voice.

Knight licked the rim of the bottle, then tilted his head back until the last drops of blood were on his tongue. "It's complicated." He went to the kitchen; upon his return, he was not empty-handed.

The two men fell silent: Knight drank blood while Mulder sipped coffee. The room continued to warm and Knight grew pleasantly drowsy. Mulder removed his coat and jacket, then resumed his boneless sprawl. When the drained bottle would have slipped from Knight's hand, he roused himself enough to set it carefully on the table behind the sofa, in line with the other two.

"I owe you," Mulder said without preamble. "A lot." He sat forward all at once, his long fingers spread wide. "If there's ever anything—"

"You owe me nothing." His peace shattered, Knight rose and began to collect empty containers. He took them to the wastecan next to the kitchen island.

"Nothing?"

Knight flashed a grim smile over his shoulder. "Nothing." One after the other, the bottles clunked to the floor of the can.

His voice a husky whisper, Mulder said, "If that's what you want, I—I don't mind."

Standing motionless, Knight let the air flow silently out of his lungs. "I haven't asked for *anything*." He heard the crumpling of the fast food paper bag, then the scrape of Mulder's shoes upon the wood floor.

"And you won't." Mulder's halting tread betrayed his hesitation. "But I can tell. And, well, it's okay."

Turning round, Knight stopped him with a look. Casually, he held the flap of the wastecan open. "Your offer is very generous, Agent Mulder. But I believe you are unaware of your reason for making it."

"Reason? It's what you wa—"

"I am a vampire. Wanting is the core of my being. But unless you make a habit of offering yourself to everyone who helps you—"

Color suffused Mulder's cheeks. "Only the ones who've been *really* helpful."

Knight pried the trash from Mulder's hand and pushed it through the mouth of the bin. "—I would suggest that you've been influenced by what I did to

you before."

"What do you mean?"

"Rape," Knight said clinically, "is not a gentle undertaking. Something of my—" His composure notwithstanding, inwardly he shrank from his own words. "—ejaculate must have been absorbed by your system. Less detrimental than the agent LaCroix left in your partner, but not dissimilar."

Dubious, Mulder pursed his lips. "More vampire voodoo, huh?"

"As good an explanation as any. And the only logical one," Knight emphasized.

For a moment, Mulder's lashes hid his gaze. Then he nodded, as if to himself. Shrugging, he murmured, "Yeah, okay. But I'm still in your debt. And if you ever want anything—booty duty included—it's yours." He smiled self-deprecatingly. "And, besides, I'd probably enjoy it."

"Mulder—"

With good-natured grace, Mulder signalled defeat and ambled back to the sofa. Knight, nonplused, went to the refrigerator and stared for a long moment at its contents, seeing nothing. He was aware of Mulder heeling off his shoes, then lying back and unbuttoning his shirt. The soft sigh as he linked his hands together at his waist was clearly audible, as was the rustle of fabric as he arranged his head against the arm of the sofa.

Knight trembled. What he had told Mulder, he himself believed. The act of taking him without feeding had left a deep, unsatisfied ache, one which Knight had learned to live with and to quell to some degree. He had assumed something similar to be true of Mulder; that he had been affected by whatever transmission of fluids may have occurred. But it had *not* occurred to him that Mulder might simply *want* him. Even knowing the truth. He reached out and grabbed a bottle at random. It was cold, always cold. An image of Mulder drenched in gleaming scarlet, writhing in passion, made him dizzy. *Mulder's* blood would be *warm*.

The neck of the bottle cracked. Knight fumbled for a container in the cupboard before the precious fluid could spill. He poured it with jerky movements into a long-stemmed wine glass, the first that had come to hand, spattering a little on his thumb and wrist. Licking it off, he scowled.

Yielding to an impulse he rarely acknowledged, Knight placed the glass in the microwave and turned the switch. Scant seconds later, he took it out, dipped a finger into the liquid, and tested it. *Much better*.

Mulder lay quiet, his feet sticking out past the end of the sofa, which was too short to accommodate the considerable length of his legs. Silently, Knight crossed the room. He should not do this. It was too risky. He must *not*—

Sleepily Mulder scratched the tip of his nose. Then he stilled. His eyes opened and he looked straight up and into Knight's face. Calmly he said, "Changed your mind?"

Speech failed him. Knight stared hungrily down at the man, unaware that everything he felt was displayed on his face.

"Whatever you want, Nick."

Swallowing a moan, Knight eased himself down on one knee. His need was too great, his urgency at flashpoint. Yet he slid a hand inside Mulder's shirt, his nearly healed palm warming instantly even through the light bandage. Sensation threatened to overwhelm him. Controlling himself with some effort, he whispered, "Forgive me."

"It's okay." Mulder was breathing shallowly and his eyes were overly wide; considering that Knight had already taken on the aspect of the vampire, the man's reaction was impressively restrained.

Tilting the glass, Knight watched the first drops of blood spill over the rim and land on Mulder's skin. Shakily, he drew a broad line, brilliantly red, from the top of his sternum to a spot an inch above the waistband of dark brown trousers. And then he leaned forward and began to lick it off. Mulder gasped. In broad, famished swaths, Knight worked his way upward, going so far as Mulder's throat. There, he sucked carefully at the carotid artery, his teeth just brushing against the fragile skin where the blood vessel was most palpable. One-handed, he undid Mulder's belt and trousers; and one-handed, he shoved the confining fabric off Mulder's hips. In his efforts, he roughly swept a hand across the man's genitals. The resulting moan was not one of pain.

Abruptly, Knight abandoned Mulder's throat, not daring to tempt himself longer. He tipped the glass over one nipple, angling his fingers against the lean ribcage to keep any of the liquid from escaping. Then he closed his mouth on blood and skin, relishing the shape and substance of turgid flesh, which grew harder with each stroke of his tongue. Exclaiming unintelligibly, Mulder arched up to meet him. There came a quiet plop as his clothing slid off his legs and tumbled onto the floor.

Knight's head was swimming. Scarcely able to think, he set the glass down. Without effort, he rose up

and flipped Mulder onto his belly. A moment later, his own belt unbuckled and his trousers bunched around his knees, Knight crowded forward against Mulder's thighs, forcing his legs apart. He took up the glass and doused him from the nape of the long neck to the lowest point between sharply outlined shoulder blades. Mulder's breathing grew more ragged. Bracing himself on one bony hip, Knight pushed into human warmth. Mulder yelped, but Knight was beyond hearing him. *Human heat, burning him, surrounding him; living flesh, willingly yielding*—Downy buttocks fit perfectly against his groin. Bending forward, Knight inhaled the oversweet odor of blood underlaid with the more compelling scent of the man. Growling deep in his throat, he rocked his hips, slowly at first, letting the pleasure build. Control was a tenuous thing, and as he started to move faster, insides fusing, it became more tenuous still. Each stroke sent shards of sensation ripping through his insides, pervading his entire body with a rare, glorious heat, as well as a treacherous hunger. When Mulder pushed back to meet him, matching his rhythm, Knight could hold out no longer. Lowering his mouth to the blood-soaked spine, he noisily began to feast.

Firelight cast an orange glow on the otherwise unlighted room. The two men lay together on the hearth rug, Mulder on his back, an arm crooked behind his head in place of a pillow, Knight stretched out along his side, his head resting on Mulder's chest. His ear was filled with the beat of the man's heart. He had forgotten how wonderful it felt to be contented; to be, in fact, *happy*.

Something, however, must be said. "You are too trusting, Agent Mulder," Knight advised him regretfully.

"That's not what Scully says. And, anyway, it doesn't apply to you."

"Really?"

"In case you missed it, I trust you with my life."

"You shouldn't."

"Too late." Sifting through Knight's hair with gentle fingers, Mulder said, "Scully would probably—"

Knight interrupted, "She knows."

"Knows?"

"About us. This."

Mulder said faintly, "She *knows*?"

Smiling to himself at the sharply increased heartbeat,

Knight replied, "She warned me not to hurt you."

"How—?"

"Said she could sense it."

"Did it—was she upset?"

"Concerned."

Shockingly, Mulder began to laugh. "She's something, Scully. God!"

"Yes, she is."

"Thanks for the update," Mulder said tartly. Then, with studied indifference, he asked, "And what about your ME? You like her, don't you?"

Simply the thought of Natalie made Knight's blood quicken. "Much more than 'like.'"

"You could try this with her, couldn't you?"

Aghast, Knight said, "She would be repulsed."

"She knows what you are," Mulder argued. "She'd understand."

"I couldn't—"

"What?"

"I couldn't risk it. I dare not."

Mulder shifted his touch to Knight's neck, commencing a quieting massage. "You're afraid that you wouldn't be able to control yourself?"

"Before you, I would never have imagined this possible."

"Having sex? I thought that was at the top of the vampire charts."

"Having sex with a mortal," Knight corrected him.

"Hm. Without killing, you mean?"

Staring into the flames, Knight replied, "Yes. I must feed. And she would be disgusted."

Mulder rocked with soundless laughter. "I'm not."

"You're a man."

"And she's a doctor," Mulder reminded him. He thought about it a moment. "Okay. So maybe it's a guy thing."

Despite himself, Knight was amused. While sex in general might be categorized "a guy thing," sex with a vampire likely would not. With the tip of a finger, he traced the ridges of Mulder's ribcage. "And what about you and Agent Scully?"

"Scully?" Mulder's hands briefly ceased their steady occupation. "She is the most important person in the world to me," he admitted. "But it would be a mistake— We couldn't—"

"You see?" Knight said lightly.

"It's not the same."

"But impossible nonethe—" The phone rang, startling them both. Knight rolled over and leapt up. He strode across the room and scooped up the handset.

"Knight." Brows elevated, he glanced sidelong at Mulder. "Hello, Agent Scully. Mulder? Yes, I'll get him for you." Knight waited while Mulder scrambled to his feet and bounded unconcernedly nude to his side.

"Hey, Scully, how are you feeling?"

As Mulder spoke, Knight paid a visit to the bathroom. There he splashed water on his face and ran a comb through his hair. Mulder was hanging up the phone when he returned.

"She's fine," Mulder said in answer to his querying look. "We're scheduled on a midnight flight to DC. Natalie's catching a few winks, and Scully's going to take a nap. So—" he concluded reasonably, "we've got about ten hours. If you're thirsty."

"Only five—I have to work tonight." Knight skimmed his hands down Mulder's shoulders and arms, mapping the terrain of his body from breast to thigh as he lowered himself before him. Cupping his buttocks and thereby holding him in place, he angled his head to capture then engulf the tip of his penis. Unhurriedly, he began to suck. "Nick," Mulder said nervously. Knight's hands travelled back up Mulder's chest and took each nipple between thumb and forefinger. "Nick—!" Flicking the nubs lightly, Knight continued to suckle. "Nick!" Mulder pleaded, holding Knight's head in place and helplessly beginning to thrust into his mouth. "Is this safe?!"

Twisting free with a snakelike motion, Knight stared up at the other man. With a wicked grin, he asked, "For you or me?"

Staggering a little, Mulder said, "If you wanted something to drink, you just had to ask."

"I want—" Knight leaned forward and played his tongue around the weeping tip of Mulder's lengthening erection. "—something—" He mouthed the entire and not inconsiderable length of him, provoking a magnificent groan from the deepest depths of Mulder's chest. "—to drink." And then he released him.

"Oh, God," Mulder whimpered. He leaned bonelessly against the table. "That was cruel."

Returning to the warmth of the hearth, Knight sat on the rug and then rested back on his elbows. He allowed his legs to fall apart. "So hurry back, and I'll try to make it up to you."

The significance of his pose gradually registered on Mulder's face. "Oh. Oh." He held a finger up. "One bottle of 'bovino' coming up." He swung round and strode to the refrigerator. Under his breath, he added, "Along with something else."

Filled with a sense of uncomplicated anticipation,

Knight realized that for eight hundred years, making love with a mortal had equated death. At this moment, with Mulder, that was no longer the case. In fact, at this moment, he could pretend, however briefly, that he had regained his mortality. And if he weren't careful, he might even put on some weight.

"Two coffees." Knight pulled a couple of bills out of his pocket and set them on the counter. He was ambushed by a yawn just as change and two cups were placed before him. Blinking apologetically, he murmured, "Thanks." On his way out of the kiosk, he remembered the need for tubs of milk and packets of sugar, having no certain idea how either agent drank their coffee.

Two pairs of eyes were on him as he came down the midway. Agent Scully, though leaning heavily on her partner, was wide awake. A slight frown creased her brow as she recognized Knight; suddenly she began to scour the interior of the terminal, including its ceiling. Only then did Knight feel the other's presence, and placed him, though as yet unseen, at the very instant that Scully did. Mulder, who was half asleep himself, alerted at Scully's sudden apprehension. He sighted Knight and tried to reassure her. But she was staring in another direction. Knight walked up to them and handed over the coffees and assortment of richeners.

"It's LaCroix, isn't it?" Scully said. Her voice was steady, but Knight sensed the bone-deep trepidation in her.

"Yes, I think so. Don't worry. He won't attempt anything here."

"There he is," Scully breathed.

Aware exactly where LaCroix was, Knight did not bother to look round. "I'll be right back."

"Nick—"

"Stay here, Mulder," Knight ordered.

LaCroix stood at the far end of the nearly deserted concourse—and he had not come through Security. Affecting nonchalance, Knight strolled up to meet him, cocking half an ear at the loudspeaker's boarding announcement. He hoped that he had not lied about LaCroix's intentions. His day had been spent in pursuits other than sleep, and he had been on duty since six. After helping Natalie contrive an explanation regarding LaCroix's victims for her reports, he had attended to neglected paperwork until it was time—with O'Hara's permission—to collect Mulder

and Scully to ferry them to the airport. He was in no condition to deal with an outraged vampire of LaCroix's years and power.

Not surprisingly, he was met with an aggrieved glare. "Did you see that? Rarely do hunters gain their potential so swiftly."

"Considering what they're up against, it can't be a bad thing."

"Nicholas," LaCroix said reprovingly.

"They aren't a threat, LaCroix."

Blue eyes intent upon Scully, LaCroix drawled, "You believe that, don't you? You really do." He struck off without inviting Knight's company. Knight was forced to take a skipping step to catch up.

They arrived at the seating area together. Mulder stood waiting for them; Scully remained in her chair, her expression watchful.

"I knew where you were from the instant you landed on the roof," she told LaCroix.

He studied her for a long moment, seeing, Knight knew, the pallid features, the bruising under her eyes, even the internal tremor that she tried so hard to conceal. LaCroix smiled charmingly, casting a meaningful glance in Mulder's direction. "He, however, did not."

"Don't threaten him," Scully stated coldly, her voice clear and calm. "You leave me and mine alone, and I'll leave you—and yours—alone."

Silently Knight applauded her nerve. There were times even he had difficulty meeting that glittering scrutiny without flinching.

"Hm." Casually, LaCroix took the empty seat next to Scully. Hands loosely clasped between his knees, he turned his head toward her. Mulder gathered himself to move, but Knight stalled him with a shake of the head. "Such an arrangement is unheard of," LaCroix remarked and leaned a little nearer. Scully, for her part, held her ground, though she was uncharacteristically strained. His voice impassioned, LaCroix said, "I should have brought you across. You are much stronger than I realized."

"You almost killed her," Mulder said angrily.

"Had I wanted her dead," LaCroix murmured, "she would be."

"Like those other women?"

"Exactly like them." The loudspeaker blared. Ticket-holders, it announced, could begin final boarding. "That is your flight, yes?"

"Yes," Scully whispered.

"Good. You are looking very pale, Agent Scully. A

lengthy rest should serve you well."

"She'll be fine." Mulder was bristling; he hovered near LaCroix with fists clenched.

"I expect she will," LaCroix agreed with unexpected mildness. "As I said, such an arrangement is unheard of. But times change." With courtly gentility, he took Scully's hand in his and raised it to his lips. "Perhaps there can be detente."

"We can co-exist peacefully?" Scully asked. Knight regarded his former master with equal skepticism. He had heard nothing like this from him before, and wondered what he was up to.

"As can the lion and the sheep," LaCroix replied smoothly. He softly kissed her hand, let it go, and assumed his most disarming demeanor. "So long, of course, as the lion remains well fed."

"And so long," Scully amended ruefully, "as the lion isn't deranged."

LaCroix's eyes twinkled. "Precisely."

"C'mon, Scully, that's us." Mulder interposed himself between her and the vampire, who seemed merely amused. Scully managed to stand on her own, but it was apparent to Knight that he and LaCroix were oppressing her by their very presence. Mulder said, "Nick—thank you."

"Take care, Mulder—Agent Scully." For an instant he was reminded of a woman he had known centuries before. She too had been filled with a rare personal strength. "Courage," he breathed.

Scully's head came round; a normal human would not have heard him. The question in her eyes turned to comprehension. "Thank you," she said. Allowing Mulder to escort her to the ramp, she continued to glance back at the two vampires every few steps. As he handed over their tickets, Mulder half-turned and saluted Knight with a tip of the head. Knight responded in kind. An instant later, they were gone.

"Some day I may tell her how you and Agent Mulder spent your day," LaCroix said mildly, rising to stand alongside him.

"It would make no difference," Knight assured him.

"Really? A pity." LaCroix folded his arms across his chest. "They are dangerous, you know."

"If you truly believed that, where are the Enforcers?"

"Possibly contemplating your demise even now," LaCroix said smartly. Then he sighed. "Ah, Nicholas—you tread a very thin line sometimes."

Unspeakingly, they watched the plane through the great window. Lights flashing, it slowly rolled backwards into the darkness. At the same time, a lazy smile began to curve across LaCroix's face. Alarmed, Knight glanced from the vampire to the aircraft, wondering what he could have missed. Had LaCroix planted an assassin? It would have to be human; Scully would have sensed another—

"Stop worrying," LaCroix said placatingly. "They are all right for the moment."

"You were smiling."

"Yes." He favored Knight with a conspiratorial look. "Sometimes a good challenge is better than the best kill." Pushing his hands into his pockets, LaCroix winked at him. "Good night, Nicholas." Humming quietly to himself, he sauntered away.

Alone and vaguely uneasy, Knight turned to watch the plane taxi away from the terminal. When it was no longer in view, he exhaled out loud. It was best that they were gone, though he would miss Mulder more than he liked to admit. Smothering another yawn, Knight headed for the car park level. Tomorrow he would sleep like the dead. Allowing himself a slow, ironic grin, he inconspicuously adjusted his trousers.

And he would not need to feed for a week.

Fin

For Carol and Jo Ann, June 1997

